Emancipation

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Emancipation

by BadGirlgoesworse

Summary

What are dependents left to do when betrayed by those they trusted most, but to find a way to become masters in their own right. Set after Department of Mysteries fiasco in Order of the Phoenix.

Translation into French available here: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11803029/1/Emancipation
Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was standing at the window of his ruined office, looking out over the school grounds bathed in the rays of the rising morning sun.

Sirius, you blasted fool!

He had plans for him, to reinstall him as the Head of House Black and use his seat for leverage at the Wizengamot for one. There were several laws he had been trying far too long to bring through, but not much longer now, Harry was going to be seventeen in just a year. Everything should go smoothly from then on.

Secondly, he wanted to rub the living proof of his fellow honourable members’ incompetence into their faces. Though he probably still could, they had Pettigrew now after all. On that thought...

He stepped over to his desk, pulled a fresh piece of parchment, an inkwell and a quill out of the drawer and scribbled a few quick instructions to Alastor. Sealing and charming it for the old Auror’s eyes only he gave the note to Fawkes, whispering his request. A moment later the bird was gone in a flash of flame. They needed to be the first to interrogate him.

He returned to his window.

Maybe it was for the best after all. His influence on the boy was dubious at best and detrimental at worst, yet the boy needed some sort of parent figure to turn to. Remus would have to do.

Poor child! To witness his beloved godfather falling through the Veil had almost broken him, making the revelation of the prophecy inevitable.

Dumbledore was not pleased. It was too early, far too early! It would not have come to that, if the plan had worked. It had been set up expertly, the opening of the boy’s mind, giving Tom an idea and opportunity to use, the ruse with the guard duty, and the final move. Never in his dreams had he expected Harry to actually manage and prevent the transfer.

No matter, other opportunities would arise. Not now though and not anytime soon. The circumstances forbade any action in that quarter, until the boy was absolutely ready. He regarded the wreckage around him thoughtfully. Considering that display it should not take too long. He had enough on his hands at the moment anyway, regaining his power and influence at both Hogwarts and the Ministry, regrouping the Order and striking while Tom was still weak, building out the spy-network...

Dumbledore’s brows furrowed angrily.

Why? Why on earth had Severus informed Sirius of the ongoing operation, why did he contact the Headquarters at all?

Couldn’t help himself but rub it in I would think. The boy needs to be put into his place and soon.
The information he is bringing in isn’t worth much consideration.

Tom had never stopped mistrusting Severus after his return to his side, obviously. If not for the Mark he would have restricted him to brewing potions only. He should remove him from this school and he would, in a way convincing enough to appease Tom of course, but still. He had been indulgent enough, it was time for a firm hand.

The first thing Harry Potter did after leaving Dumbledore’s office was to check on his friends in the hospital wing. The grief and revelations weighing heavily on his mind had been pushed into dark corners where they could wait, until he had ensured himself of their wellbeing. All of them had been treated and were now sleeping soundly. Hermione had been the only one with a truly dangerous injury, because the cutting curse Dolohov had used did not yield to the usual treatment. After a thorough looking and talking to he had been dosed with a sleeping draught and slept through the day undisturbed.

He woke up around dinnertime. The events of the last night crashed down on him with vengeance, suffocating him. He needed to get out of there, someplace quiet and solitary, where no one would think to look for him. He changed into clean clothes quickly and almost ran out of the door before Madam Pomfrey could get hold of him again.

Walking fast through the empty halls and unable to push away the demands of his loudly complaining stomach, he decided to make a trip to the kitchens first. The thought of facing his clueless and carefree fellows in the Great Hall right now was unbearable.

The house-elves, though busy, were as welcoming as always and loaded him with all sorts of food and drink before he even finished his request. Wonderful creatures, he thought to himself, why did Hermione insist on setting them free again?

Outside the painting with the bowl of fruit he put his goods aside and pulled out the Marauder’s Map. Studying it carefully he decided on the chamber which had contained Fluffy his first year. The third floor corridor was generally used for storage and was for that reason student and teacher free, even Filch did not went there, unless on business. Harry took his things, put the invisibility cloak on and ventured out.

That night found Severus Snape, the resident Master of Potions, in his sitting room in front of a crackling fire, a tumbler of Firewhiskey in hand and a half empty bottle on the side table.

He knew he shouldn’t indulge right now. The Dark Lord would be calling him any moment and he would need all his wits sharp to survive the ordeal. Oh, what a mess! Almost the entire Inner Circle had been exposed and arrested last night. It was a good thing of course, it really was, though considering whose skin was going to take the brunt of the Dark Lord’s anger he just couldn’t muster enough joy to be pleased about it. He checked his pockets for his heavy duty pain reliever and other medical potions.

On the brighter side, the flea-bitten mutt was no more. Unexpectedly, the death of his most loathed rival did not bring him the sort of deep satisfaction he always imagined it would. Probably because the circumstances were not painful enough for his tastes, it had been simply too fast. The bastard did not deserve it fast! Especially in the face of what Severus had to endure on regular basis.
It might also be the fact that even dead Sirius Black still held a higher place in Dumbledore’s estimation than he. Now though he could almost have hope, since the only true competition consisted of the Golden Boy and the Wolf, both of whom he could very much outlive in the near future.

Speaking of the boy, he was going to be trouble.

*Blame me for everything no doubt, and the Headmaster of course will do nothing to dissuade him.*

Severus had no illusions as to why. Dumbledore had a full cadre of convenient scapegoats at hand, all he wanted was to be appreciated for the work he did.

A sharp, throbbing pain shot through his arm and the tumbler fell to the floor crashing to pieces. The Dark Lord was angry indeed. He downed a sobering potion, repaired the tumbler with a flick of his wand, put it on the table and left.

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It was a typical late June night, warm and clear, illuminated by twinkling stars and an almost full moon. A light breeze and the chirping of crickets outside were the only things disturbing the stillness of the cathedral-like chamber, flowing in through an open window.

On its sill sat a young man just out of boyhood hugging his knees firmly to his chest, the remains of a hastily consumed meal littered the floor below him. He would not be able to sit like that for hours on end if not for the Cushioning Charm he had the presence of mind to cast beforehand. His emerald eyes, red and swollen, were looking out into the night unseeing.

Harry had cried until there were no tears left to shed it seemed, reflecting the hollow emptiness in his chest quite well. The pain consuming him did not lessen though, even if he was able to think clearly now, more or less, and thinking was exactly what he should have done this time yesterday. Never again, he silently swore, would he put one step before the other without considering it thoroughly.

*Too late for Sirius of course, bet Snape is getting himself off on that somewhere right now.*

*NO! No hasty conclusions anymore! Think, consider the facts, Snape at least was always telling you to do exactly that!*

The only one beside Hermione no less. That was saying something, though he couldn’t see what at the moment, but he would.

*You’ll learn or get someone else killed, there aren’t really any other options.*

He took a deep breath and emptied his mind of all thoughts again. It was far easier than he had ever believed, not even his scar bothered him anymore.

*Well, congratulations Harry, you’ve gotten it at last! Yet again, too late for Sirius.*

All it took was to imagine his cupboard late at night shortly after he had turned four and realised for the first time that he was truly alone in this world. It was not that hard really, it was just what he was right now.

Dumbledore’s revelations were supposed to answer any questions he had. Instead, they had opened a
flood of new ones he hadn’t even realised were buried deep inside, bringing an alarming number of inconsistencies to the forefront of his mind, which he had every intention to examine closely. One by one though, or go insane otherwise. He could see the merits of a Pensieve quite clearly now. However, not having one of his own, he would have to do with Occlumency alone.

Where to start? At the beginning, he sneered uncharacteristically remembering Dumbledore’s words. And where was that? Ah, yes, my parents!

He had consciously decided that from this moment on his parents did not matter. He did not know them and could not trust what he had been told about them any longer, the best example being the whole mess with Snape’s memories. He did look like them undeniably and he may have inherited some of their personality, yes, but that was all. He was not raised by them, had no memories of them beyond what he had seen with Dementors close, and most importantly, they were not here to complain.

He did not blame them for that of course, but he couldn’t let some imagined or implied expectations have any influence on his actions in the future. Hell, he didn’t even know how they made their living! And wasn’t that quite strange and suspicious? How it had never occurred to him before was quite unsettling. This definitely smelled of careful manoeuvring on Dumbledore’s side, so the question was why? What reasons did the Headmaster have to conceal such a trivial thing from the orphan in his care? He had a feeling the answer would come to him by itself when he had investigated his family history.

Harry uncurled from his previous position on the windowsill and pulled out his wand.

“Accio my parchment, inkwell and quill!”

He seriously hoped his dorm-mates were already asleep or it would be quite a strange sight indeed.

Less than ten minutes later the summoned items hovered before him. He plucked them out of the air and placed them carefully on the makeshift desktop he had transfigured from a spare napkin, lighting the torches on the nearby walls with a word of command.

He needed to organise himself he knew, or all his Occlumency would not prevent him from running around in circles. This was just too big to keep in his mind only, since he was no Master Occlumens like Dumbledore or Snape just yet. On the other hand, he needed to protect himself from unwanted prying, so concealing and security charms were in order. Luckily, he had learned a fair share of them during Umbridge’s regime. He was aware though that those would not be able to stop truly powerful wizards. He needed to operate in absolute secrecy.

A cold shiver ran down his spine at the conscious realisation of the magnitude of his actions. Albus Dumbledore himself was no longer on his side. Worse, he might never have been on his side in the first place.

Harry had every right to be afraid, he was alone, had a long list of powerful enemies, a fate hanging over his head and now no allies at all beyond the small circle of friends, whose loyalties may clash with his own in the near future. The hopelessness of his position was overwhelming him, robbing him of his resolve.

He took a deep breath and emptied his mind. There, better!

There were only four options available to him so far, suicide, flight, compliance and struggle. He
took up his quill knowing without doubt which one he was going to take.

‘Constant vigilance’ from now on or everything is lost. He put the quill down, took out his wand and fired every revealing spell and privacy ward he knew. Satisfied he went back to work.

His family. The Evans’s and the Potters. Who could help him with this?

Aunt Petunia most certainly, if he asked just right, would tell him about his muggle family, even if only to rant. The Potters were supposed to be an old pureblood line, meaning every other pureblood would know about their history, assets, political and social standing. Well, he could ask Ron he guessed, but couldn’t help the feeling of unease uncurling in his stomach at the thought. If Ron had known anything, why didn’t he ever mention it before, knowing full well that Harry was always eager to hear about them? The answer came to mind immediately and unsurprisingly, jealousy, Ron’s greatest weakness and one this time Harry just couldn’t forgive.

Another deep breath, then another, trembling one this time, treacherous tears burning in his eyes, threatening to spill. I’m NOT going to cry, not for Ron, never for Ron!

He pushed his emotions away with brutal force. He couldn’t afford a breakdown right now. He had work to do, a lot of work, knowing instinctively that this was the only time he was going to be allowed to do it unobserved in the near future. His breathing evened out, his face turned into a blank mask he knew, though he had no mirror to see it.

Who then? Malfoy? He could not help laughing, envisioning the scene in his mind, Malfoy’s face in particular. Suddenly his laughter died almost choking him.

Of course! Neville!

It was so simple and easy and would have never occurred to him before. The key to his family, as well as the understanding of this whole society and its workings, was in the hands of this shy, seemingly inept boy. The answers had been before his very nose all along. Merlin’s balls! Had he always been this stupid?

No, he thought soberly, only distracted and manipulated, a bit overwhelmed as well. Neville it was then. He made a note on his to-do list.

Next point, the Dursleys.

Had he really been just left on their doorstep with a letter? Was some sort of provision made for him, some sort of monthly stipend or something? He had been visiting the primary school, did it mean they were receiving governmental childcare money at least?

He considered everything he knew about them and all they have ever told him about his residence with them and realised that there had been nothing. Everything he had been made to do was to earn his keep.

Furthermore it was exactly what Dumbledore had intended in forcing Harry on them. Had provision been made, Harry doubted he would have been treated like that. The Dursleys considered themselves decent people after all, especially aunt Petunia, what would the neighbours think otherwise. Mrs. Figg had been placed in the neighbourhood to keep an eye on things, reporting everything to him.

Why Dumbledore had done that was clear as day, especially with the prophecy in mind. He needed a
meek and grateful little saviour, a perfect pawn. Harry had entered the wizarding word as a blank page to be written upon by the next best man or wizard in this case.

Well, not any longer!

Harry tried to be angry, but found he couldn’t. It had been strategically a brilliant move, he would give the bastard that. One thing was still puzzling him though, what had happened to his parents wills? He made another note on his list.

Next, my first introduction to this world.

From his talks with Hermione, Dean and others Harry knew that all muggleborn and magical orphans living in the muggle world were contacted personally by a member of staff and a Ministry representative at home or an appointed location arranged beforehand. It was done so because of the Statute of Secrecy and the obligatory registration of all muggles with the knowledge of the wizarding world. The parents were informed of their rights and duties, as well as educational options for their children. The children received introductory pamphlets on all and any topics concerning the wizarding world, history, society, education, St. Mungo’s, Gringotts, the Ministry, law, magical locations, transportation, and so on, AND a list of recommended readings on the most important topics. After that an appointed witch or wizard accompanied the family on their first trip through the Diagon Alley.

Hagrid had been sent to contact Harry and bring him into Diagon Alley to do his shopping, and answer any questions he may have had.

One did not have to be a Seer to predict the outcome. Harry had left the Alley not much more informed than before entering it, except for that he was famous and Slytherins were bad. Dumbledore didn’t want him to know ANYTHING!

Nothing new, is it?

He wrote down on his list to ask Hermione to borrow all her pamphlets and books, which she undoubtedly had with her here, for the summer. He would have enough time to go through them then. He was not going to allow the Dursleys to lock up his trunk and force him to work nonstop ever again, that much was for sure.

Harry put the quill down and rubbed his eyes tiredly. So much for summer holidays, but there was nothing for it. Knowledge was a weapon and this particular one had been used against him most effectively in the past.

Very well then, what next? Ah, yes, the Sorting, and Harry Potter at his most naive!

Harry truly didn’t know if he should laugh or cry this very moment. Laugh at his childish perceptions, the absolute stupidity of his beliefs and the easiness with which Dumbledore had managed to plant both in his mind, or should he cry for the straightforward, light-hearted, unassuming boy, who had fallen through the Veil together with his godfather, never to return.

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Gryffindor Prince, the Golden Boy, Dumbledore’s Man, was dead!

The young man sitting on that windowsill was Harry Potter, the Chosen One, the Saviour, the snake in a lion’s hide, his own man. There was no reason denying it any longer, the Hat had been right all
along, he would have done well in Slytherin.

_Scout out the other houses, especially Slytherin, for possible allies, stood written on his parchment._

Point was that Dumbledore for all his display of magnanimity did not deem the Slytherins worthy of saving, and not only Slytherins, but people with Death Eater background in general. He was stuck upon the unyielding belief that people were defined by their choices.

Which Harry absolutely agreed with, but knew firsthand that sometimes the situation could be so hopeless that there were no choices, unless other options were offered by someone else. That was something Dumbledore in all his age and wisdom had never understood.

_His greatest weakness, my best chance!_

To create his own side in this war, to provide help to people with no strings attached and ensure a future most truly for everyone, that was a goal worth fighting for indeed!

Harry blinked sheepishly.

_Merlin, I hope I’ll survive this!_

Yet he liked the idea regardless. If he was destined to be the Saviour, then he should do it properly, instead of making some lukewarm promises he never intended to keep. That was exactly what Dumbledore and Voldemort had been doing all this time, shaping the world after their liking with no regard for the wellbeing of those they deemed unworthy to reside in it.

_If Dumbledore is the Lord of Light and Voldemort the Lord of Darkness, then I shall be the Lord of Dusk and Dawn, neither Light nor Dark._

He took that thought and put it into the deepest abysses of his mind suddenly afraid. If this ever came out...

_They would burn me on stakes_, he could not help chuckling darkly.

He cast the Tempus Charm. Four twenty-one in the morning, he needed to return to the hospital wing soon. He sighed heavily rubbing his burning eyes.

What was there left to ponder anyway? His years at Hogwarts consisted of nothing more than unserious efforts to gain some knowledge and an endless string of adventures, which in retrospect had been just tests set up by Dumbledore to gain an insight into his abilities or misguided attempts to unlock the ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’, or something.

Well, as hard as it was to admit, the unserious efforts definitely needed to change. And as for Dumbledore...

Harry looked out into the night thoughtfully.

...the same as Voldemort he supposed. There was nothing he could do at the moment, but stay low and watch out biding his time.

An amusing picture entered his mind making him smile grimly.

The Dark Lord and the Light Lord were gathering forces, resources and knowledge right now,
preparing themselves for battle. And the Lord of Dusk and Dawn should do the same.
In the early hours of the morning Severus apparated back to his usual glen in the Forbidden Forest, just beyond the outer wards, and slowly made his way back to the castle. He did not need to light his wand, even in the darkness always present underneath the canopies of these ancient trees. He knew this well-trodden path like the back of his hand in any possible condition.

The meeting had gone differently than expected and he still couldn’t decide what to make of it. He had not been punished tonight, which in itself was an unheard of occurrence ever since his return to the Dark Lord’s side last year. Present had been only a quite battered Bellatrix, Greyback and the Carrows, who obviously had been on business elsewhere last evening. The Dark Lord had paced and ranted in rage for a good half an hour, then sent the others away and sat down gesturing for Severus to come closer.

“Tell me what the old coot plans to do now,” he hissed impatiently.

“Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts late last night and spent several hours in his office before calling together a staff meeting this morning to inform us of the events at the Ministry and his rehabilitation as the Headmaster and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. A meeting of the Order is planned this evening, my Lord. I will be able to tell you tomorrow,” Severus said bowing demurely still on his knees.

“Where is that Umbridge woman?”

“I don’t know, my Lord. My Slytherins told me, she took Potter and the mudblood Granger into the Forest in search of some weapon Dumbledore supposedly had been hiding there. She had not been seen since.”

Voldemort hummed thoughtfully, then smiled insanely happy all of a sudden, making Severus shiver inside. This expression always boded great pain, he only hoped not for himself this time.

Voldemort grabbed the front of his robes and pulled him closer caressing his cheek with the knuckles of his cold fingers in an almost loving gesture, the blood-red eyes though were looking straight ahead, unfocused. Severus struggled not to flinch, his Occlumency shields firmly in place.

“He thinks he has caused me great trouble, doesn’t he,” Voldemort whispered into his ear, eyes still distant. “But all he did was to force me to advance my plans somewhat, nothing more.”

He took Severus’ face into his hands and looked directly into his eyes, not using any Legilimency though.

“Severus, my slippery serpent, go, come back tomorrow the same time.”

And then he was released to crawl back, bow and leave.

Severus had reached the lawn and made his way past Hagrid’s hut towards the main entrance. There was no need to hide. He had not received the privilege of the Dark Robe and Mask back yet, nor would he anytime soon he supposed, though the recent events might have sped up his rehabilitation some. The Headmaster should be pleased to hear it. He would see him at the meeting this evening, since there was nothing of importance to report.

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Harry and his friends were staying in the hospital wing through the day, disregarding the fact that most of them were released already. The paper had been quite interesting this morning and they reasoned it was in their best interest to stay away from the rest of the student body, until the waters calmed down a bit. Madam Pomfrey had forbidden any visitors beside family, which they all were grateful for.

Dumbledore stopped by to ask them what happened to Umbridge and Harry let the others explain having no desire to deal with him at the moment, just sitting there sullen and quiet. No one questioned it.

In the afternoon the parents arrived.

Harry found himself firmly in Mrs. Weasley’s embrace before he could even blink. She didn’t say anything, just held him comfortingly, knowing miraculously what he needed right now, making him quite undone. And he knew that very moment that the Weasleys honestly cared for him. They were good, decent people, who stood for their beliefs and not just Dumbledore’s pawns, and so must be many other members of the Order. Well, they were still his pawns of course, but weren’t really aware of it looking up to him for guidance, trusting him not to lead them wrong, exposing themselves to exploitation.

To be honest, who would have ever believed the great Albus Dumbledore capable of such ruthlessness. Ironically enough Percy had. The only mistake he had made was to let his ambition blind him and put his trust into the Ministry, which under Fudge’s government had sunk into corruption.

Finally, Mrs. Weasley released him giving him a moment to compose himself, before looking him over closely.

“You’re holding up alright?”

Harry nodded not trusting his voice. She embraced him once more, before leaving to see to her children, smiling at him full of compassion.

He stepped over to Hermione’s bed and sat down on the edge allowing her to pat his arm knowingly. Mr. Lovegood was standing with Luna on the other side of the ward, making it quite clear as to where his daughter got her sense of dress. Mrs. Longbottom in her usual haughty sternness was talking to Neville two beds over.

According to Neville and his own experience with her, this was both a formidable witch and woman. Not an Order member he suddenly realised. By chance or choice? This was a question worth looking into.

12 Grimmauld Place in London was buzzing with exited witches and wizards when Severus arrived discreetly, as was his habit, taking his usual seat in a shadowed corner of the kitchen. Watching his fellow Order members was as tedious as it was fascinating he found yet again. Unlike any Death Eater gathering, these were never in any way productive. Information was presented, courses of action proposed, then squabbled about for hours on end, then Dumbledore presented the solution he had intended to pursue all along, and everybody agreed. Those who didn’t, went along with it anyway, no one contradicted the great and wise Albus Dumbledore. He always knew best.

If he had ever liked something about the Dark Lord, it was his honest domination. You always knew your place, on your knees, no mind-fucking necessary.
Finally, the grand leader arrived surprisingly bringing Minerva along. Severus hadn’t known she had been released from St. Mungo’s already. He was glad for that despite himself. She was needed now more than ever.

After the usual round of jovial greetings everybody sat down and became quiet. Thank Merlin!

Dumbledore stood before the gathering. “I will assume everyone has been informed about the outcome of the operation at the Department of Mysteries by now. However, no matter how satisfying the capture of eleven members of the Inner Circle is, we all know they won’t stay out of action for long. Azkaban cannot be considered secure anymore, though the Minister still refuses to believe it.”

A round of agreeing murmurings followed.

“Albus, you have been reinstalled as the Chief Warlock, can’t you propose a vote of no confidence to the Wizengamot?” Elphias Doge suggested.

“I could indeed, my friend, but as you well know a motion of such magnitude always takes its time. A final vote would not come to pass until the autumn at the earliest and Fudge’s term ending by that time anyway, I do not see any use in that,” Dumbledore smiled patronizingly sitting down again.

“No. Our main objective for the time being will be the neutralisation and replacement of Voldemort’s supporters within the Ministry, which will allow the new government to master a position of control in the time of war to come, giving us a strong and useful ally to rely upon, instead of the adversary that is undermining our actions, which it is at the moment.”

“But won’t Fudge try to prevent that?” Tonks asked voicing everyone’s concern it seemed.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled in delight.

“Alas, I sincerely doubt Cornelius will have time to notice anything beyond the headline of the next Prophet this summer, my dear. The controversial circumstances accompanying many of his actions, this year especially, as well as those of his staff, will send the public into frenzy.”

After that a heated discussion about everyone’s assignments followed. Molly Weasley had a few concerns of her own though.

“Albus, what of this horrible Umbridge woman? Is she still in any position of power at Hogwarts?”

Now that was something Severus was interested in as well. The Headmaster grew severe as he intertwined his fingers on the table, hardness entering his eyes.

“My dear, there is truly no need to concern yourself about it. Ms. Umbridge’s actions this past year, and two nights ago in particular, had earned her a lifelong stay in Azkaban.”

The whole room exploded with cries of surprise and demands for explanation. Dumbledore raised his hand calming them in a few moments.

“Her crimes are quite severe indeed. Not only has she used a class five Dark artefact on minors during her time as a Professor, a blood quill,” he clarified preventing further questions, “she has also admitted ordering two Dementors to Surrey last summer to administer the Kiss to Harry Potter...”

The outrage was unstoppable this time. Severus had to fight the impulse to cover his ringing ears, though he had to admit it was quite justified. Something like that had never been done before, not even for known Death Eaters during the first war.
“SILENCE!” Dumbledore roared cutting them off. “I know you all are upset, but the worst is yet to come.” He looked gravely into the round. “Two nights ago she used the Cruciatus Curse on Harry Potter interrogating him in front of witnesses.”

Shocked, wide-eyed silence followed.

“Is she a Death Eater?” someone asked stupidly.

“No,” Dumbledore sighed, “she definitely is not. The evil though carries many faces, not only a white mask.”

No one had anything to contribute to that, Severus sneered openly.

The rest of the meeting went predictably. Molly Weasley protested against Potter’s placement for the summer, as she did every year, only to be gently turned down with the usual arguments. Having had an insight into the boy’s family life during their sessions Severus could for the first time understand why she was asking in the first place. That did not change the fact that there was nothing for it though. The blood wards aside, he had a strong suspicion Dumbledore wanted the things just as they were and what Dumbledore wanted he commonly got.

The date of the reading of Black’s will was announced and all people mentioned notified. Lupin though, looking like death warmed over, did not seem interested in anything beyond the spot on the wall, which he had been staring at the entire time. Not even blinking when Potter’s escort for the event was chosen from a horde of volunteers, earning himself looks of pity from his peers and a stern one from Dumbledore.

On that note the gathering started to dissipate. He was almost out of the door when Dumbledore called him back.

“Severus, there are things I need to discuss with you. Please accompany me to my office.”

Severus was quite intrigued as to the subject of their conversation. There was truly nothing of importance coming to mind while he waited for Dumbledore to make his farewells and followed him though the Floo.

In the Headmaster’s office he refused the offers of tea and sherbet lemon sitting down in his usual seat before the desk. Dumbledore took a sweet and regarded him seriously.

“Severus, we have found ourselves in quite a predicament. The original plan of setting a trap for Tom, using Harry as bait has gone arse over kettle quite spectacularly. As far as I can see, our hope now lays mainly in more direct initiatives.”

Severus nodded in agreement.

“We will need to extend the number of competent fighters on our side though, to be in the position to strike. I will initiate careful recruitment of course, but it is unquestionably the recent generation of Hogwarts students, who will have to do their part, either as Order members or privately protecting themselves and their friends and family from Death Eater assaults.”

He nodded again.

“You will agree with me I’m sure that it is of uttermost importance to fill the Defence Against The Dark Arts position next year with a competent and knowledgeable candidate.” Severus sat up straighter if possible realising there this was going. “I need you, my boy, to take it.”
Severus almost opened his mouth to protest, all sorts of good arguments running through his head. Who would fill the Potions position on such a short notice? The curse, what will be the consequences? What about the Dark Lord’s reaction? What of his Head of house duties when he had to leave in just a year’s time? What of his Slytherins, children of Death Eaters in particular? Who will look after them offering comfort and advise, especially now? Many of their parents and siblings are or will land in prison soon, who will they look up to for direction, the Dark Lord? But seeing the cold hardness in Dumbledore’s eyes he realised it was not a suggestion, it was an order. The Headmaster knew all this and did not care.

Severus sat there, icy dread sizing him, freezing his very soul. He nodded not trusting his voice. What was else could he do?

“Excellent,” Dumbledore smiled fatherly, as he usually did when pleased with him, but Severus knew better now, noticing for the first time that the smile did not reach his eyes, nor did it ever before.

“I will have the contract sometime tomorrow. Please come by after dinner, we will then clear the details together.”

Severus nodded again rising still in shock. He turned and made his way out on automatic, the customary billow of his robes reduced to a light sweep, not noticing the almost smug gaze taking in this very notion.

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Down in his quarters Severus let himself fall into his chair before the fire, which was burning merrily, as it did the year round to keep his cold, dump dungeon chambers comfortable. He reached for the bottle and tumbler still on the side table and poured out a good shot downing it immediately, repeating the same several times until the bottle was empty.

The heat of alcohol thawing the icy grip on his soul did not help his condition though, only replaced the numbness with the pain of betrayal.

Stupid blind fool! Severus could not help the tears burning in his eyes for the first time since his mother’s death.

He had always prided himself on being able to see through anyone’s machinations, especially the Headmaster’s, sneering at the easiness with which others fell for his deceptions. And now lo! He had not been any better than them all this time.

Fool to believe Dumbledore could deem him worthy in any way other than as a tool to be used to his purposes, to believe he had redeemed himself in this ‘great man’s’ eyes, washing away the sins of his youth with sweat and blood.

To convince myself, he could harbour parental feelings towards me! A Slytherin!

Severus was laughing hysterically, not heeding the tears now running down his face in earnest. He leaped up, grabbed the bottle and threw it against the wall with all his might enjoying the sound of shattering glass. The tumbler soon followed.

He stood there for a while breathing in shuddering sobs. Then after calming somewhat, he felt all energy leave him and sank to the ground. He vanished all traces of tears with a spell staying there he was though.

He really should not be surprised by this turn of events, he admonished himself. Had it not been
always like that? First he fell for the prospect of his father’s pride, learning everything he was instructed to diligently, the Dark Arts in particular, only to get insults and beatings in return. At school it had been the respect and acknowledgement of his dorm-mates he craved, always following the unspoken guidelines of Slytherin etiquette to the letter, even embracing their fanatic pureblood ideology, only to be targeted by the Marauders at every turn and watch his ‘friends’ stand by laughing. The Dark Lord had promised power and belonging, only to brand him and put him to work like common cattle. Dumbledore... he had promised redemption, Severus remembered, something he actually had been granted by some, but obviously not by Dumbledore himself.

Anything beyond that was a product of my own imagination. His face burned in humiliation hidden by his hair, hanging around it like curtains.

His hands curled into fists in sudden anger. It's not like he hadn’t encouraged it! Stringing me along like a bloody puppet!

Severus looked up to find himself almost nose to nose with a house-elf. Startled violently he had to bite back a scream, while the creature stumbled backwards bowing lowly.

“Winky is sorry, master Potions Master,” she squeaked apologetically, “Winky is not meaning to scare you, Winky just came to look, master Potions Master.”

“To look?” he asked distractedly, his pulse still in his throat.

The elf looked up at him curiously. “To look after you, master Potions Master.”

Severus stared at her uncomprehending. No one had looked after him ever since his mother died. Minerva and Poppy cared he knew, but this was something more substantial.

He took in her appearance, a dirty and torn two piece dress, which might have been light blue at some point, the bat-like ears sticking out of a matching hat. Crouch’s former house-elf he remembered finally. The staff had been specifically instructed not to accept offers of permanent servitude, should she offer them. He knew of course that it was not what the creature had meant right now, but feeling like rebellion after Dumbledore’s betrayal, he decided it was as good as.

“You wish to look after me?” he purred silkily, a predatory glint in his eye.

Winky squeaked excitedly, ears standing at attention, the huge eyes growing even wider in surprise. She nodded shyly.

“Very well then, wait here.”

Severus rose and went into his bedroom. The ritual knife he needed was hidden with the others in a secret niche behind his dresser. He took it out but hesitated, his eyes falling on the carved chest holding some keepsakes which belonged to his mother. If he was going to show a finger to the Headmaster today, it was only fair to make it a round sweep and do the same to the pureblood fanatics out there, he reasoned taking it out. No one needed to know after all.

Back in his sitting room he sat down on the floor beside Winky, who was bouncing zestfully with her spindly hands clasped together, tears of gratitude shining in her eyes. He carved the rune of binding into his left palm with careful precision, not bleeding nor feeling any pain due to the knife’s magic, while Winky undressed herself completely and vanished the dirty clothes into nothingness. He put his hand on the elf’s head and began the binding chant in old Gaelic, feeling it sweep through him, settling in his very core. A moment later it was done, Winky now belonged to him and his bloodline.
It was a strange sensation he mused, with a lapful of naked elf clinging to him, bawling its eyes out, bubbling about generosity, to have an actual ownership of such a powerful living creature. He had never had this experience before. The Snapes being an old line to be sure, but relatively poor for several generations now, had not had any house-elves.

*No wonder the Dark Lord takes such pleasure in marking his followers!*

It was an elating feeling indeed.

“Now, now,” he patted her on the back, “come, let me equip you properly.”

At that Winky leaped out of his lap and cleaned herself and the wet spots on his robes with a snap of her fingers, standing before him eagerly.

He opened the carved chest and took out a silvery grey silk scarf imprinted with an intricate floral pattern. Wrapping it like a toga around the trembling elf, that looked at him with huge disbelieving eyes, he pinned it in place with a simple golden brooch shaped like a rosebud.

*It does look well on her,* he thought smirking. *Lucius would have a collapse.*

“Take good care of them,” he instructed her, “they belonged to my mother.”

This seemed to have been definitely too much for the poor creature, since she fainted dead away. Well, this was fascinating he had to admit, he had never heard of an elf fainting before. Not knowing what to do he called Tipsy, the elf usually bringing him tea to his chambers, and asked her to take care of it. Tipsy just grabbed Winky’s hand and they both disappeared.

*Well enough,* Severus sighed putting the chest and knife away. After casting a Tempus Charm to check the time he vanished the glass shards and took a sobering potion, feeling strangely at peace despite everything. At least now he knew where he stood.

Dumbledore did not want him at Hogwarts anymore, it was clear as day. He did not care for the fate of the Slytherin children. *Had he ever?* Severus could not help but sneer. He was still welcome in the Order he supposed, *more or less.* He was still the youngest Potions Master in over five hundred years, an excellent fighter and a powerful, knowledgeable wizard, Dumbledore would be truly stupid to try and get rid of him entirely. He was still a spy, even if his standing did not allow him to be an effective one at the moment, but it did not mean that there was no chance for it to change!

*Not an entirely hopeless bargaining position,* he summarised. If he played his cards right, he might still be able to save some of his little serpents and come out of this mess alive.

Severus examined his pockets ensuring all the potions he might need tonight were there and walked out. He had a Dark Lord to report to.
Monday morning dawned as brightly as the days before. Harry lay quietly in his hospital bed and listened to Ron’s snores coming from the bed next to him. He had fully expected to have nightmares after watching Sirius die only two days ago. He hadn’t had any. Somehow it made him feel bad, guilty about not suffering as much as he deemed worthy of his godfather. On the other hand, he had now two nights of full, undisturbed sleep for the first time since he came out of the maze at the end of last year.

It made him feel less on edge he realised, less prone to jumping ahead, both physically and mentally, like he had been constantly this year. Secondly, it was further proof to his Occlumency actually working, even without conscious input on his side, and it astounded him to be honest. He had gone from absolutely hopeless to proficient in less than a day. It should not work like that, even he knew that, and his gut was telling him that the answers were most likely directly under his nose.

He could not help the groan escaping him as he rubbed his scar out of habit. The best place to hide something is in plain sight they say, and it was working too well in his case yet again.

Well Harry, you stupid dolt, how come it never occurred to you to just go to the bloody library and look it up!

He sighed in resignation. Research had always been Hermione’s thing. He would have never done anything beyond what he needed for his homework, and even then it was kept to a bare minimum, he always did it with Ron after all. Dumbledore knew him too well.

A look of determination entered his eyes. This needed to change, all of it! He could not afford to be sloppy, could not afford to be lazy and most certainly not predictable. These days were now gone forever leaving only a small pang of regret in the region of his heart.

Harry could hear Madam Pomfrey rummage around in a cabinet next to her office door.

Might as well get up, he reached for his glasses with a sigh. They had decided to go down to breakfast in the Great Hall today. This was going to be far from pleasant, but best to just get out of the way. There was only one week left until the holidays and he had yet to find a way to shake off Ron and corner Neville somewhere alone at the same time. Hermione was not going to leave the hospital wing until the last day, which was both good and bad.

He gathered a set of fresh clothes and his sponge bag, which looked like some strange, gutted out sea creature, from the drawer of his bedside table. He had gotten it from Luna last Christmas. Smiling fondly to himself he headed off to the showers, greeting Madam Pomfrey in passing.

When he came out the others just began to stir. It was half past eight though and breakfast long underway, even with classes out. Not wanting to go alone he sat down to wait. Half an hour later they were finally assembled and looking at each other tensely.

“I think it would be alright for you to sit with us, Luna,” Harry said to her softly. “We don’t have classes anymore.”

The others just nodded and started moving towards the exit.

The Great Hall hushed at their entrance only to start again louder. They proceeded to the Gryffindor table and settled down trying not to pay attention to the hundreds of eyes resting on them, nor listen to the not at all quiet speculations flying around.
To be honest Harry didn’t need to eavesdrop to know what they were thinking. He had read the paper yesterday, the today’s should be here any moment. He was their Hero again, their Saviour, not the attention-seeking freak to be put away in St. Mungo’s closed ward for his own good. The Prophet should not be able to do this so easily, drag his name through dirt one moment and hail him the next! As a matter of fact they had no right to, he remembered suddenly. Hermione had mentioned something about slander being illegal even in the wizarding world several times. He had not been listening, too busy ranting or wallowing in self-pity.

He chewed on his toast gloomily, watching the owls arrive with the morning post, his peers opening their issues eagerly, staring in disbelief or pointing in his direction, whispering. His patience came to an end, so he took the paper out of Ginny’s hands and read the title, ‘...the Chosen One...’ springing directly into his eyes. He pursued the article in rising anger. This rage was cold though, not showing on his face in any way.

_Blessed be Occlumency!_

Harry was not going to scream profanities like he would have earlier this year. No, there were other ways of showing displeasure.

_Time to send signs._

It was risky he had to admit, but supposed he could pass it off as anger, grief and wish to avenge Sirius, which was actually not that farfetched.

He browsed through the rest of the issue leisurely. No admittance of mistakes on the editors’ part, no expression of regrets about ruining his reputation, no official public apology. He smirked uglily inside, knowing full well that everyone was watching him right now.

He returned the paper to Ginny and turned to address Luna loud enough for everyone who wished to hear.

“How much compensation can I demand for slander of this magnitude?”

The silence that followed was almost deafening. He had a really hard time to keep his face.

Luna considered it for a moment. “A big paper like this?” she answered dreamily. “Up to five thousand I suppose. They have not apologised publically.”

He nodded seriously and returned to his eggs. _Fucking hell!_

He needed a solicitor, he needed to talk to Neville as soon as possible, he needed to go to the library and look up Occlumency, which he supposed he could do right now. Nobody would question what he was reading in there yet.

He finished his eggs, stood up and left, the Hall exploding in whispers behind him. No one followed him, nor asked where he was heading.

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Severus Snape had to admit he was greatly disturbed. Not only had the Dark Lord seemed to be actually pleased about the prospect of his removal from Hogwarts, he had instructed him to use his time and position to teach the younger generation of Slytherins to the best of his ability, give them private lessons even, if he deemed them lacking. The Dark Lord’s plans in this quarter were worrying him, but there was nothing he could do about it for now.
What Potter had pulled this morning though, had thrown him completely. Not knowing what was on the Dark Lord’s mind was one thing, not knowing what was on Potter’s was another. More so because he could not decide which was worse.

Dumbledore seemed completely unconcerned about it, as were other members of staff. ‘Poor child... with what he had to go through this year... and his godfather dying in front of him... completely understandable of course...’

*No, it wasn’t understandable at all!*

That something like that had even occurred to him was beyond comprehension in Severus’ view of the individual that was Harry Potter. Potter did not think, he had Granger and Weasley to do it for him! And no amount of grief could have brought this on, no matter what they were saying.

It meant of course that Potter had unexpectedly turned into a snake in the grass...

The image this saying brought on made him stop abruptly in the middle of the corridor and start laughing. Thankfully no one was there to witness, other than some portraits, which were tut-tutting at him.

This was it, he decided breathing heavily, he was losing his mind! The strain of his double agent status and all the Crucios were finally getting to him!

*Get yourself together man!*

He leaned against the wall for a few moments to compose himself before proceeding to his quarters. He needed a stiff drink, that’s what he needed, not a straitjacket yet. He was greatly relieved not to have classes to teach right now.

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This evening long after dinner Harry was sitting alone in a shadowed corner of the common room. His house-mates, now fully informed about the battles and losses he had suffered due to the accounts from Ron, Ginny and Neville, had let him be so far, only gracing him covertly with sympathetic or curious glances. His friends seemed to have decided to give him some room and time to come to terms with it as well, and it was quite alright with him to be honest. He had a lot on his mind to deal with in peace.

Just like he had imagined, the books he needed had been there in the main library all this time. They contained no actual instructions though, only general knowledge and history, but it was more than enough to answer any questions he had. First of all, Dumbledore was most truly a conniving bastard! *A true Gryffindor, my arse!* It looked like Harry was not the only Slytherin, who let himself to be sorted into the house of lions.

Secondly, Snape seemed to actually have been right, ‘Clear your mind!’ had been all there was to it. He had not been teaching him though, but opening his mind for the visions instead. *On Dumbledore’s orders of course, who else’s.* Ron’s accusations had been fully justified this time, although as usual directed to the wrong quarter.

The question was why? Had Dumbledore wanted to use him to gather more information or set a trap for Voldemort? Both seemed likely at this point.

Thirdly, Harry showed all signs of a natural Occlumens, or rather a natural affinity for Mind Arts in
general, since there was no separation into disciplines, only different ways of using one and the same ability. Even better, it did not look like Dumbledore even suspected, and after his display this year, neither would Snape.

He could not quite believe it though, how come he just noticed? Thinking about it... he had always been able to tell when people lied to him actually. Maybe the stress of the last days had activated some instincts that had lain dormant all this time.

Well, there was a way to test it. According to the books, a natural Legilimens was able to enter another’s mind wandlessly and wordlessly without being noticed, with the exception of another practicing Occlumens.

Harry surveyed the room deliberately in search of an unsuspecting victim, breathing in and out, emptying his mind in preparation. There, this fourth year girl kept glancing at him constantly. Harry imagined himself as smoke entering through the dark pupils of her eyes. As soon as her face turned towards him, he pushed himself forward mentally, falling right in with an almost scary easiness.

“...his friends not with him? Don’t they care that he suffers?” An image of her going over and taking him into her arms comfortably followed, accompanied by feelings of affection.

Harry withdrew carefully looking directly into her eyes. She blushed and turned away. He was feeling quite uncomfortable himself to be honest, a bit ashamed as well about breaching the girls privacy so carelessly. Nothing for it though and it was a success, which meant he held quite a powerful tool in his hands. In his situation it would be most likely of enormous advantage.

Alright, one more time, just to make sure.

Neville was sitting not far from him and was unlikely to harbour a crush on him too, so he got ready and struck. The sensation was like running headfirst into a wall, he almost raised his hand to rub his aching forehead, which was actually not aching at all, and blinked at an equally shocked Neville.

Realising suddenly what had happened he flushed pink in embarrassment, biting his lip and running his hand through his hair sheepishly. Neville was still staring at him though, so he tilted his head in the direction of the dormitories, got up and made his way there, as if making it an early night. He had not to wait long sitting on his bed before the door opened and Neville came in.

“Sorry, Neville, I’ve just been testing something,” he said still embarrassed when the other boy took seat on Ron’s bed right across from him.

“You do know that Legilimency is bordering on illegal, don’t you?” Neville asked him smiling slyly, something Harry had never seen him do before.

“Is it? Well, how would I, if no one ever tells me anything?” he rubbed his face in frustration. Neville was looking at him curiously.

Harry sighed, now or never. “I’ve wanted to talk to you about something, several things actually, but I need you to promise me to keep it to yourself.”

“A Wand Oath?” Neville asked seriously.

“No,” Harry laughed, “I suppose it’s not that serious, just your word.” He thought it over. “And I suppose you could tell your grandmother as well, she doesn’t seem like the gossiping sort,” he smiled.

Neville snorted at this, but nodded. “Alright.”
Harry took a deep breath and calmed himself. “I don’t know anything.”

Neville blinked at him uncomprehendingly. Harry regarded him quite earnestly though.

“I mean it, Neville, I don’t know anything. Dumbledore has kept me completely ignorant all these years and I was too naive and careless to ever notice. Well, until now,” he sighed rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. “I was raised a muggle, have never been told anything meaningful about my family, have never received those introductory pamphlets all muggleborn get...” He narrowed his eyes remembering something else suddenly. “I’ve even been excluded from those sexual education classes all muggleborn received third year.”

Neville blanched at that. “But you are still a virgin, aren’t you?” he asked apprehensively.

“Yes,” Harry answered taken aback by his reaction. Neville exhaled visibly relieved, then sat up suddenly, hit by the magnitude of what he had been told. He folded his hands in front of his mouth blinking deep in thought, realising the enormity of Dumbledore’s actions, as well as possible plans concerning his friend and fellow Head of House.

Hot anger rose in him. How dare he?! Who the bloody fuck he thinks he is?!

He looked up into those tense, but hopeful emerald eyes.

Mother of Merlin and everything divine! This boy sitting before him had NO IDEA!

“Harry,” he said aghast, “you have not the slightest concept as to what has been done to you!”

Having Harry’s full attention he continued. “I don’t even know where to start,” he was completely lost all of a sudden and looked away.

“At the beginning,” Harry sneered hatefully, startling Neville. “Dumbledore’s words,” he answered the unspoken question.

Neville nodded in understanding, at the beginning then.

“Our society can be considered quite archaic in some aspects and far more modern than even the muggle one in others. For example, we have still the system of great Houses consisting usually of several families under the same name. Those are ruled by one Head of House, who has almost complete control over all family members and their spouses,” Neville paused to make sure he had followed so far. Harry nodded for him to continue. “We do not put so much importance on gender though as muggles did or still do, the firstborn in direct line is the Heir, no matter if it’s a Lord or Lady.”

Harry looked puzzled here, so he elaborated. “Lord or Lady is the official title of the Head of House, it has nothing to do with nobility, even though some fancy otherwise,” they both smirked here. “Not that there aren’t actually noble Houses. Here in Britain it’s the Blacks, the von Eschelons, the Lestranges and the Mcmillans.”

He nodded absorbing the information hungrily, having already grasped that he and Neville were both Heads of their respective House.

“If the direct line dies out the first sideline takes over. Sometimes it can be prevented through blood adoption. That means the childless Lord or Lady chooses the Heir he or she deems worthy and performs a special adoption ceremony to make them their own flesh and blood so to speak, but the heir keeps his or her own blood as well... Harry?”
Harry froze in shock remembering the incident last Christmas suddenly. Neville got up and came over putting his hand on his arm in concern.

“Does this ceremony happen to involve quite a bit of blood on both sides?” He asked hoarsely. Neville nodded getting the implications.

“Who...”


Neville sat down next to him staring, the political consequences unfolding themselves before him. He gulped. “You’re going to be the Head of House Potter and Black?”

“It looks like it,” Harry answered having the feeling that this was not the bomb yet.

“Does Dumbledore know?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

At that Neville chuckled and rubbed his hands gleefully.

“Oh Harry, this is absolutely great! You have no idea...”

He looked chastised though at Harry’s glare.

“Well, let me enlighten you then.”

They made themselves comfortable sitting on Harry’s bed.

“The political system in the wizarding world has both old and modern elements as well. The government is modern. The Minister of Magic is the Head and his cabinet fills the Head offices in the different departments. The Minister is elected directly by the British magical population after a campaign and chooses his own staff afterwards. The term is usually fifteen years, unless he is voted out beforehand. The controlling and legislative element is the Wizengamot. It’s mostly a remnant of the Old Days replacing what had been once the Wizard’s Council. It consists of 43 permanent seats belonging to the Heads of House and 23 elective ones, which people are voted into by the permanent members. A new law can be proposed only by a permanent member or the Minister himself, for it to go to debate it needs to be seconded by a permanent member, after the debate it is voted pro or contra by the full Wizengamot, then passes or is rejected. The Wizengamot is also the High Court of the wizarding world and presides over heavy criminal cases.”

Harry nodded his understanding.

“Now it comes,” Neville crowed gleefully. “An already existing law can only be terminated by a member of the four noble families if seconded by another permanent member, and it can only be voted back into place in changed form if it’s seconded by the same two members, unless the other three noble Heads second unitarily. Lord Lestrange is an outlaw and has lost all rights to his seat, which is going to be filled by an heir of a sideline after his death, and Lord von Eschelon is actually five or six right now. That means you, Harry, will be able to terminate every single law ever passed by the Wizengamot and second it only if it was changed to your liking! The only exception is if the entire court votes against you!”

“Fucking hell!” Harry contributed, his mind buzzing.
“Yes!” Neville agreed. “But this is only the political power you will receive as soon as you turn seventeen. Do you need a minute or should I continue?”

He took a deep breath and cleared his mind. “You can I think.”

“You have received a key to your vault after turning eleven?”

Harry nodded.

“That’s only your trust vault set up for you by your parents to cover educational expenses and pocket money and such. The rest of your assets and property is currently held in trust by Gringotts until your coming of age. You’ll have no access to it beforehand, but you can already request a folder listing the number and inventory of all your vaults as well as all businesses, investment stocks and property in your possession.”

Harry pondered it for a while. “How much do you think I have?”

Neville chuckled at that. “Well, as to gold I can only guess, three million approximately, then there is at least one manor, maybe several cottages and holiday houses. Businesses, I don’t know for sure, but the Potters definitely had several stocks. I’ve heard mentioned that your father had invested into the Bolt Company at some point, if it’s true you are having an excellent income right now, even without lifting a finger.”

He was met with shocked silence.

“What? You are the last of Potters, don’t forget that. It means every single coin that the family has ever made through the centuries is now yours, plus it has been lying there untouched for the last fifteen years, getting only fatter through the stocks.”

“Fucking hell!”

“Yes,” Neville agreed again. “But that’s not all.”

“Not all?” Harry asked stupidly.

“Nope,” Neville assured him with an amused glint in his eye. “Have you forgotten the adoption? You are the future Head of House Black now as well.”

“Oh let me guess, while the Potters can be considered wealthy, the Blacks are rich as shit?”

“Yes and no,” Neville laughed. “The Blacks have been rich as shit, it’s true, but it was rumoured that they have contributed greatly to the war effort on Voldemort’s side. I’ve no idea as to how greatly, if you get my meaning, but you may have a couple of millions left, plus the ancestral home and the family jewellery, those cannot be sold being bound to blood.”

“Peanuts then,” Harry concluded sarcastically.

“Yes, it is, believe me,” Neville said quite seriously. “The Blacks were considered one of the richest families in whole Europe, not just Britain.”

“Fuck!”

Neville could not help double over laughing. Harry smiled at him.

“Yes, I need to broaden my vocabulary, I know,” he sighed heavily. Neville sobered seeing his face.
“See, it’s exactly what I mean! Everyone knows it, only I don’t! I don’t even know my parents’ professions!”

“Your father had not been working, as far as I know, your mother though had been an Unspeakable, and your godfather an Auror. Have you never asked Ron about it?”

“No, to be honest, I’ve never even thought there was anything of importance to know, and Ron had never mentioned it either. I suppose he assumed I knew already or just didn’t want to talk about it, because of his you know...” he gestured “...issues.”

Neville nodded in understanding. “There is something else you absolutely need to know, Harry. Sexuality in the wizarding world is a bit different than in the muggle one. It’s more powerful and binding and has therefore more meaning, especially the loss of virginity. It doesn’t mean that we have no sex at all before marriage of course, rather on the contrary, it concerns only penetration.” He looked just as uncomfortable as Harry here. “For example, virginity cannot be taken by force, it needs to be given freely. A virgin therefore can never be raped or even molested as a matter of fact.”

Harry nodded for him to continue. This was indeed news to him.

“Furthermore we look upon it far less restricted than muggles ever have. We have no venereal diseases and there’s no risk of pregnancy before marriage, because we do everything but penetration, so there’s nothing to fear, you see...” They both blushed ferociously at this point. “Well,” Neville cleared his throat, “so, we just do it. It’s looked upon as completely normal to have sex with your girlfriend or boyfriend, and it feels good, so why not...” He rubbed his burning face. “Merlin, I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with you!”

They both burst out laughing and rolled around on the bed for a while. After calming down they just lay side by side, staring up at the canopy.

“By the way, we don’t make such a distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality either.” He thought about it for a moment. “I guess it’s because, unlike in the muggle world, homosexual pairs can bear children as well.”

“What?”

“Well, not the natural way obviously,” he elaborated, “but there are spells and potions, which can create male or female genitals temporarily.”

Like transsexuality, Harry considered, only biologically as well. “I’m definitely going to borrow Hermione’s pamphlets.”

“And I’m going to send you some books over the summer if you don’t mind. There’s more to the responsibility of a Head of House than sitting on your bum all day, feeling important.”

“Thanks,” he laughed, “I’d appreciate that. And can you ask your grandmother to recommend a good solicitor as well? I want to proceed against the Prophet.”

“Sure.”

The door opened this moment and Ron came in stopping abruptly and staring at them.
“Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Neville said getting up and moving over to his own bed. “We are done snogging already.”

“Shut up, you!” Harry threw his pillow after him laughing.

Ron continued to stand and stare at them dumbfounded.
Visits

Hermione Granger found herself suddenly awake. It was about four or five in the morning she could tell from the pale light shining through the windows. She lay on her side in her hospital bed pondering the lingering alarm that kept her from going back to sleep, or what woke her up in first place, when she saw it.

Mirrored in the glass door of a cabinet at the opposite wall was a human shaped shadow standing at a column about two beds behind her. Her heart leaped into her throat as she watched it carefully making its way towards her. Her wand was within reach on the bedside table, but there was no way she could grab it unnoticed, so she stayed as she was and feigned sleep, observing the approaching figure through half closed lids.

It seemed to be a boy about her age judging from his height, dark hair, Slytherin uniform.

Who the hell is it? Zabini? No! White skin...

He stepped into the light from the window right behind her. Theodore Nott.

Hermione did not know much about him, being rather quiet and exceedingly shy he was easy to overlook. And since he did not belong to Malfoy’s gang she had no contact with him other than sharing classes. Furthermore, she had gotten the impression that he was not quite right in the head. Not like he was retarded or something, on the contrary, he seemed intelligent and capable as a wizard, but there was something not quite normal about him nonetheless.

Socially inept... well, she was not the one to point fingers at that, but he behaved childlike at times, too childlike for a boy his age, like his development had been arrested.

Damaged...

She was old enough to come up with quite a few possible reasons for that, especially in a son of a Death Eater, and could not help but feel sorry for him at times.

He stepped closer yet again, halting at the foot of her bed and she was able to see the reflection of his face almost clearly now.

The expression Hermione was met with was beyond anything she could have ever imagined to be directed towards herself. He was looking at her like she was the embodiment of all his dreams, his deep blue eyes lit with an unearthly fire flickering with admiration, desire, sadness, anger, protectiveness and something sinister she could not identify.

“My Lady, why do you punish me with distance?”

Not able to decide if she should be afraid or fascinated she watched him reach out for her, not touching though, just running his hand over her body from foot to shoulder, only inches from her covered skin.

“Am I not worthy of your notice?”

She had to suppress a shudder, of what exactly she had no presence of mind to register.

“I’m not a Lion, it is true, but does it mean that I’m worth nothing?”
His fingertips dove lightly into her hair, combing it with sensual slowness.

“I don’t believe you are this cruel.”

He knelt down and buried his face in her hair fanned out on the pillow, whispering passionately.

“Let me show you how much I love you,
Let me avenge you, kill those who brought you pain!

I shall not ask much in return.

I’d wish you see me! Just look at me and see me! Is this too much?”

She lay completely still, not daring to breathe until he finally rose and went away.

Hermione looked over her shoulder to make sure she was alone and sat up trembling.

_Sweet Merlin and holy gods! I can’t believe it!_

Scratch not quite right in his head, this boy was completely psychotic! And obviously obsessed with her as well!

She had to admit that it was actually flattering. Ron and Harry have sworn vengeance for her too, but this was someone who might make good on his word to the letter. A son of a Death Eater in love with her, a muggleborn! This was either hopelessly romantic or just further proof of how unhinged he truly was. And that was exactly where she was torn in her feelings. What should she do now? Should she do anything in the first place? What did she want?

Hermione Granger had always prided herself on being a realistic and down to earth sort of girl. She knew therefore quite well that being a bookworm and a bossy know-it-all did not raise her stakes to land a boyfriend sometime before she was old and wrinkly. Her looks had improved over the years, it was true, the teeth were now normal and the hair manageable, with the help of a few spells and potions of course, her body was not bad either. It did not change the fact though that she absolutely detested the Quidditch loving, empty-headed specimen of the opposite gender, which this school seemed to be crawling with. Harry and Neville were alright she supposed, but Harry was like a brother and Neville was with Luna now. She had checked out a couple of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, but had been disappointed even there. She had not dared to turn towards Slytherin so far.

And here was this boy, kneeling down before her, reciting poetry and all but begging her to give him a chance! Except for shyness he was very much her type, intelligent and good looking, with dark-brown hair and tall, lean physique. Love of books and learning aside, she was a hot-blooded girl, almost woman now, and bar of some snogging with Viktor never had a boyfriend before.

Fact remained though that this boy was also very much damaged goods and she had a feeling that should she get involved with him it would be for keeps, since he would never ever let her go.

She leaned back into her pillow staring up at the ceiling. The question was then, was she desperate enough to latch on to the first best one she got or should she just leave it be?

with xxxoooxxx

Severus came slowly to awareness and blinked sleepily rubbing the grit out of his eyes. He could hardly remember the last time he had felt this rested, or had slept undisturbed through the night in the
first place. No wonder though, since his bed seemed to be drenched in cushioning charms, as all of
his sitting room furniture for that matter, ever since the bonding. He almost didn’t recognise his
quarters stepping into them yesterday morning. Not that they have been dirty before, but now the
very stone walls seemed to gleam with polish, not a speck of dust anywhere, not an item out of place.
Even the bloody air felt clean and fresh, with a subtle smell of pine. How she knew pine was his
favourite was beyond him.

He pulled his wand from under his pillow and cast a Tempus. Quarter to ten. He shot upright staring
in disbelief, breakfast was nearly over and he had overslept. Overslept! For the first time since... he
blinked, he could honestly not remember. Sighing heavily he moved to get up. The luminescent
globes on the walls sprang into full intensity as soon as his feet touched the... He blinked and looked
down. A rug, an emerald green one with tasteful silver embroidery to match his duvet. It had not
been there yesterday.

He had left the floor bare, since the cold stone usually helped to wake him up in the morning.
Looking around he could not see an uncovered spot anywhere. Not able to decide if this was good or
bad at the moment he proceeded to his unnaturally gleaming bathroom for a well deserved shower.
The state of his hair would be most likely a point of gossip in the staff room today, with it being
absolutely clean due to not bending over a cauldron since the crack of dawn.

Standing under the warm spray Severus could not help but feel strangely unbalanced. The life he had
known so far had been pulled forcefully from under his feet, leaving him hanging in the air only
seconds from a painful impact. Admittedly, it was not what had bought on his current state, as he
was quite used to that procedure, rather the fact that he was unsure if the impact was going to be
painful this time.

Out of the bathroom and into a set of fresh clothes he walked into his dining room to order something
to eat, only to find it arranged and waiting for him already. And not just the usual Hogwarts fare, but
rather everything he actually liked and seldom got here. Severus sat down staring at it, a warmth
spreading through his chest he could not quite identify, even though it felt familiar somehow.

A knock sounded through his chambers, startling him. Composing himself he stood up to answer it,
the wards telling him the visitor to be Minerva.

“Good morning, Severus, you have not attended breakfast, so I decided to pay you a visit instead.”

She seemed to be apprehensive about something he could tell.

“Good morning, Minerva, as you can clearly see, I am still among the living,” he drawled in his
usual fashion. “Is there anything else you wanted?”

“May I come in?”

He stepped aside and gestured for her to enter.

She moved into his sitting room stopping abruptly and taking it in with raised eyebrows, did not
comment though, following him to the dining room.

“Join me?” He asked gesturing towards the table now set for two. He really loved that elf.

“Yes, thank you,” she said clearly unsettled now, taking the seat next to him and looking him and the
set up over with furrowed brows.

Whatever she was thinking she had decided to keep to herself for the time being. They poured
themselves tea and started on breakfast in Severus’ case.
“Albus informed me about appointing you as the next year’s Defence instructor,” she got straight to it.

Severus chose not to comment taking a careful sip instead.

“And you are just going to take it?” she burst out indignantly.

“I am in no position to refuse,” he answered calmly not looking at her.

Minerva watched him, resignation taking over. After screaming into Dumbledore’s face for half an hour she had no words left it seemed, not even to express how disappointed she was with Albus lately.

“I thought he...”

“You were wrong!” Severus cut her off glaring angrily. As was I, he thought looking away to rein himself in. He was not going to fall apart in front of her!

She looked at him full of sorrow, feeling the weight of his bitterness settle heavily on her heart. There was no telling what consequences the curse would have in his case.

Her eyes flashed angrily. This was not to be tolerated! She would never tell this to his face, but he was the son she never had and she would not let him go into danger unprotected! She called upon the forces of earth, accessible only to those who bore children.

_Dana, oh Great Mother, hear my plea! Grant my son Thy blessing, as he had been without Thy touch for far too long!_

Feeling the power gathering in her core she rose and stepped in front of him. Severus looked up startled when she took his face into her hands and bend down to kiss his forehead, transferring the Blessing of the Mother. Satisfied she departed without a word leaving a bewildered Severus behind, staring after her, not noticing the rune of protection disappear into his skin where her lips had touched him.

xxxoooxxx

Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna were sitting around Hermione’s bed and talking amicably about nothing of importance, which she was quite glad about, since it distracted her from thinking about the last night’s visitor. Pondering this whole mess was giving her a headache, yet she simply could not get rid of the warm feeling in her gut the memory of his smouldering eyes and his hand in her hair was giving her. Nor could she prevent that feeling from spreading lower actually, she thought fighting a blush and concentrating back on what Ron was saying.

“...seen Malfoy this morning?” he crowed in delight. “Not so cocky anymore with daddy disgraced publically and shipped off to prison, is he now!”

He was referring to the advertisement of all captured Death Eaters’ names and their sentence in the morning paper of course.

“Oh Ron, you know very well they won’t stay there long anyway,” Hermione could not help pointing out. “So, I guess it’s actually not that much of a deprivation.”

“Nonetheless,” Neville insisted. “The damage to his family’s political and social standing is quite sizable.”
Harry nodded surprising her. He did not comment though, looking distant. They talked some more about the reactions of their peers in general, until her lunch arrived via house-elf and made them take their leave for today. She didn’t really mind staying here alone, since her trunk and books were brought down for her. She actually had time now to go through all the readings she had checked out from the library ages ago, but never got to them with everything else on her mind.

Speaking of books, she thought eating her soup, she really should do some research on mental illnesses to try and get some insight into what she was dealing with in Nott. Preferably some muggle scientific publications, seeing as the wizarding world was very much behind in that particular field.

Hermione put her spoon down sighing in resignation. There it was again. She was considering it. Seriously considering it!

Just can’t make it easy for yourself, now can you, girl? Why don’t you take Ron or some other nice, stupid bloke? He and a couple of others have been making eyes at you for a while.

Speaking of the devil, the door opened and Ron sneaked inside making his way towards her.

“You’re done with lunch already?” she asked confused.

“No, I’ll go later,” he sat down in the visitor’s chair closest to her. “I needed to talk to you alone.”

She nodded and put her tray aside.

“Has Harry talked to you, about you know..?” he shifted uneasily.

He meant Sirius she supposed and shook her head.

“He hasn’t talked to me either,” he furrowed his eyebrows.

“Ron, just give him some time! It has been only four days,” she implored immediately.

“But he has talked to Neville, Hermy,” he whinged annoyed. “We are his best friends! Why the hell is he talking to Neville?”

She stared at him in disbelief. And here it was, the reason she could never be with Ron, or any other idiot for that matter. For all his impressive strategic thinking he was thick as brick more often than not and had the emotional range of a spoon to boot. Not even mentioning the fact that she absolutely HATED that nickname he had dubbed her with.

She shook her head sadly and adopted a tone she would use to explain something to a child.

“Ron, he has talked to Neville, because he’s an orphan just like himself, and is the most likely person to have even the slightest idea of what he is going through.”

“He’s not!” Ron protested vehemently. “His parents are still alive!”

Hermione closed her eyes and turned away giving up. There was no use in talking to a wall.

“I thought you’d understand,” Ron spat angrily getting up to leave.

“I do understand, Ron!” She glared at his back as he stormed out. “I understand only too well,” she whispered to herself.

Sighing she pushed the tray further away not hungry anymore. Granted, Harry was not behaving the way she had expected. He was quiet, but not sullen, rather retrospective; he was distant, but not
brooding, if she didn’t know any better, she would call it calculating; and he was not depressed, calm
and sad, yes, but not actually suffering. Harry had changed she could tell, for the better in many
ways, but it also worried her that she might not know him anymore.

Then she would try and get to know him again, she decided. He was and always will be her first and
best friend.

xxxoooxxx

Severus had been anticipating this visit the whole day actually, waving Draco into his sitting room
without decorum and pouring them both a glass of wine. He could not bring himself to give him
Firewhiskey, even if the situation might excuse it. They sat for a while in silence, just enjoying the
opportunity to drop their masks, or Draco could at least, without fearing any consequences.

“How on earth could this have happened?” Draco finally burst out halfway through his second glass.

“Carelessness, Draco, what else,” Severus needed to tread carefully here, knowing full well a wrong
move would cost him greatly. “They became too confident in their success and have underestimated
Potter’s power.”

“Potter’s power,” Draco snorted disdainfully.

Oh, this was not good, Severus needed to nip that in the bud. He slammed his hand on the table
between them, startling his godson violently.

“Don’t make your father’s mistakes!” He looked right into his eyes conveying the seriousness of this
statement, but concealing the meaning. The boy needed to find his way on his own, whichever one
that would be was now beyond Severus to decide.

Draco stared at him wide-eyed for a moment, but then turned away sighing. “I will try not to.”

Severus heart bled for him behind the mask of placidity, *if only I could believe it!*
Requests and Confrontations

Harry was sitting quietly at the Gryffindor table, chewing on his toast, instead of joining in the heated discussion Ron had with Seamus and Dean about the yesterday’s article. He was withdrawing himself without meaning to it seemed, but could not help it. Talking about meaningless things meant distracting oneself from important ones, and about those he did not want to talk, not with them at least.

He had spent the whole afternoon yesterday researching the great Houses, his own in particular, but found out little beyond general knowledge. A short inquiry towards Neville had revealed that the families themselves were usually the ones documenting their own history and keeping the records in private libraries out of the public’s reach. That meant of course that he would have to wait another year until he could look into them, the family grimoire especially. On the brighter side, since the records of heredity and bloodlines were managed by goblins, he could request a family tree, which he did immediately together with the overview of his assets.

Despite this drawback he found that he had made quite a bit of progress. With Neville’s help he had compiled a detailed list of things someone in his position was expected to be proficient in. It was long, very long, which made Harry the more annoyed with Dumbledore. He should have been educated since childhood instead of having to learn it all at once now. Thinking about it made him realise just how dependent he would have been after turning seventeen, most truly a puppet with the strings firmly in Dumbledore’s hand, and even grateful for it.

Neville leaned over to him. “My grandma is coming at ten to take me to Diagon Alley and finally get me a new wand. I just realised I’ve never introduced you to her properly. You could make your request to her directly then.”

“Thanks, Neville, I’d like that very much,” he said, then suddenly had a brilliant idea. “And there is something else, if you’re going there anyway, could you please withdraw 100 Galleons from my vault and exchange them into muggle currency?”

“Of course,” he said surprised.

“Excellent,” Harry refrained from rubbing his hands in glee, discreetly taking his golden key out of his inner pocket and giving it to Neville.

The grin disappeared though and was replaced with a blush of embarrassment when he suddenly realised something.

“Ah... you said ‘introduce properly’, is there some sort of protocol and such involved?”

Neville smirked. “Why yes, there is, want me to show you?” he asked innocently.

Harry glared at him blushing even deeper.

“Oh fine,” Neville relented amused, “come on, we’ve still plenty of time.”

They rose and left the Great Hall not noticing Ginny’s curious eyes following them, nor the group of Slytherins for that matter, but Snape did and excused himself from the head table immediately.

xxxooo0xxx

Draco knew that what he was doing was foolish and undignified, but he just couldn’t let it be. He
had lost face. Gryffindors were laughing at him openly, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were either doing the same or showing him the cold shoulder, even within his own house people were either treating him indifferently or smirking behind his back. He had to vent his frustration somewhere and Potter was the best candidate at hand.

He hastened around a corner on the second floor with Crabbe and Goyle in tow and finally saw Potter and Longbottom ahead. That he was with Longbottom and not the Weasel was quite strange he had to admit, as he called out to them disparagingly, making them stop and turn towards him.

“Feeling smug, are we, Potter?” he spat coming closer. “Just you wait! Father and the others will be out of there in no time. You, your mudblood and blood traitor friends are going to pay!”

He stood there breathing heavily and watched Potter… not react at all, which was quite unnerving actually. No triumphantly smirk, no derogatory remarks, nothing! Potter just looked at him dispassionately, as did Longbottom next to him. If it had been Weasley, wands would have been drawn already.

Potter tilted his head to the side, as if contemplating something. “Proud of your father, are you, Malfoy?”

Draco straightened taken aback. Whatever he had expected, this was not it.

“Tell me, Malfoy,” Potter continued, “what is the motto of your House?”

Not knowing what else to do he answered firmly. “A Malfoy bows to no one!”

“Really?” Potter drawled with an amused glint in his eye. “To be honest, I have yet to see it.”

This was the moment Severus came upon them. “What is going on here?” he demanded looking them over suspiciously.

“Nothing, sir, just a friendly chat,” Potter contributed.

“Ten points from Gryffindor for your insolence, Potter, now leave!”

Potter half nodded half bowed gallantly and he and Longbottom went on.

Draco stood there feeling his world tilting dangerously. Potter’s words had pressed into a wound deep inside, which had been festering more or less consciously since his childhood.

“Draco?”

He looked up into his godfather’s worried eyes.

“Nothing,” he shook his head distractedly. “It’s nothing.”

He turned and made his way down the corridor with Crabbe and Goyle on his heel feeling Severus’ concerned gaze on his back, but having neither strength nor conviction left to reassure him.

xxxooxxx

Harry turned to ask Neville if the side corridor over there was alright for the impromptu lesson and was surprised by the look his friend was giving him. Respect and pride were shining in his eyes, reassuring him on many levels that even if Ron decided to cut all strings one of these days, he would not end up completely friendless. More so, it was someone who he actually could call his equal in everything that counted. They had so much in common and had grown up and out of their
insecurities now, he didn’t see why this wouldn’t turn out to be a friendship for life. And Neville thought the same he was quite sure.

Three quarters of an hour later a completely humiliated Harry was now ready to meet Mrs. Longbottom with all proper decorum. Who in the name of Merlin had thought that there were five different ways to bow, seven different ways to smile, three ways to kiss a lady’s hand and about two dozen formal phrases for greetings and farewells. And those were only the basics!

Mrs. Longbottom was waiting in the antechamber right off the Entrance Hall when they arrived promptly at ten.

“Grandmother, may I present my friend Harry Potter,” Neville got right to it, “Harry, this is my grandmother, Augusta Longbottom.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom,” Harry said bowing.

The haughty lady looked them both over approvingly giving Harry her hand, which was kissed dutifully.

“Well, finally remembered your manners I see. A bit too late, but better than never.”

They sat down for a bit of small talk, until Harry finally found the opening for his question.

“Well, I must admit I have a small service to ask of you, Madam,” Harry smiled nervously. “You have followed the articles concerning me the Prophet has been publishing this year, I assume?”

She nodded sternly.

“I wish to sue the paper for compensation and wanted to ask you to recommend a good solicitor in this case.”

Mrs. Longbottom smiled her assent. “But of course, Mr. Potter, it is of no difficulty at all.”

“Thank you, Madam.”

When they were finally departing Neville gave him thumbs up behind his grandmother’s back, reassuring him that all went well and Harry fell back into his chair sighing in relief. If this was what they called politics, he could tell already that he did not like them, but it was good to know that he was capable to swim through on occasion. Now though he needed a cup of tea, for the lack of anything stronger. He rose and headed for the kitchens.

xxxoooxxx

Harry could honestly admit that he was quite nervous when approaching the white washed doors of the hospital wing this evening. He knew very well that unlike Ron, who would simply give him the bloody pamphlets and be done with it, Hermione would not allow him out of her sight without explanation. Trouble was that he could not decide what to tell her exactly. He would like very much to tell her the truth, she was his best friend after all and he’d rather not lead her on, but...

And therein lay the problem. She had always had this unwavering trust in authority figures, Dumbledore especially. Should she decide that he had simply lost his mind due to the stress he had been under these past days and needed to be ‘taken care of’ until he became reasonable again... then everything was lost. He would either have to flee the country or... Well, he just didn’t know!

He took a deep breath and emptied his mind calming immediately. Hermione had been always a
reasonable, logically thinking human being. All he had to do was present to her the undeniable facts and she would draw the right conclusions on her own.

He needed her, he reminded himself. She was like a sister to him in many ways and he just couldn’t continue on the road he had set out on without her advice. Ron was an alright bloke, but there was no denying anymore that their ways had begun to part. He gathered the famous Gryffindor courage and stepped inside.

Hermione looked up from the book she was reading as he reassured Madam Pomfrey that, no, there was nothing with him and he just came by to visit. Escaping finally he approached her with obvious care.

“You are making a face like a funeral,” she joked teasingly when he sat down on the edge of her bed.

“It might become one, who knows?” he sighed looking away.

“Okay,” she put her book aside, “I know that face, out with it!”

He took out his wand and placed a privacy ward around them.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “It’s not about Sirius I suppose.”

“No, I’ve accepted that more or less I think...” he played with his wand nervously. “I don’t know how to start. I...”

He looked directly into her eyes. “Did you know I’m going to be the Head of House Potter?”

She nodded.

“I didn’t! I didn’t even know there were such things like great Houses or inherited seats in the Wizengamot and what not. Did you know I’m going to inherit a shitload of money?”

She nodded slowly getting an idea as to where this was going.

“I didn’t! I didn’t even bloody know how my parents made their living in the first place!”

Hermione smiled understandingly. “Dumbledore told you only now and that’s why you are angry with him?”

Harry blinked at her. This was not going where he wanted it to, but it would. He would make her understand.

He leaned forward slightly. “Dumbledore didn’t tell me ANYTHING!” he almost screamed into her face.

He leaned back and watched her stare at him in shock. “Neville did,” he continued calmly. “And only after I’ve asked specifically, suspecting for the first time in my life that there are things the old goatfucker is hiding from me, which have nothing to do with Voldemort or the war whatsoever.”

They sat for a while in silence. Hermione’s mind was valiantly trying to come up with an explanation that did not show the Headmaster in a very unbecoming light. She didn’t manage it, so she leaned back into her pile of pillows and sighed heavily, accepting it.

“I don’t know what to say,” she looked up at him quite lost.
“He’s a self-serving bastard and deserves to be strangled with his own beard?” Harry proposed innocently.

“Oh, Harry!” she refrained from thumping him, but only just.

Silence again.

“What are we going to do now?”

He smiled relieved. *We, not you.*

“Not much for the time being,” he sighed rubbing the back of his neck. “There is nothing we could do before my coming of age anyway.”

Then he remembered the list. Taking it out of his pocket he removed the concealing charms and handed it over.

“Only a small excerpt of everything I should have learned by now and will be expected to know by my future peers,” he sneered sarcastically.

She looked through it carefully, then eyed him with a raised eyebrow.

“You will need to organise yourself.”

He could only burst out laughing. “That’s my Hermione!” he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

“Don’t you get too hasty,” she poked him in the chest. “That means no Quidditch for you next year of course.”

“Yes, I’ve already figured as much, thanks,” he sighed as if suffering greatly.

“You’ll survive it,” she patted him comfortingly and reached for her wand to make a copy for herself.

“I’ll look into it and work out a study schedule for you over the summer.”

“Thanks, and I wanted to ask you for those introductory pamphlets and books you received as a muggleborn. You do have them here, do you?”

“Of course I do, as you well know,” she narrowed her eyes at him playfully. “Look in my trunk under the bed. ...there in the side-compartment.”

Harry took the already shrunken items out and put them into his pockets, pushing the trunk back in its place.

He sat down looking at her seriously. “Don’t tell Ron.”

“No,” she sighed agreeing, “Ron would most truly never understand.” She smiled suddenly. “Oh, when he finds out about you quitting the team...”

“I’ll never going to hear the end of it I suppose,” he chuckled. “But Ginny managed alright this year, so it’s not that big a disaster. And as for my suddenly acquired ardour for studying, it can be passed off for the wish to be best possibly prepared for the upcoming war, which is not a lie actually.”

Hermione regarded him, her head tilted. “You have changed, you know.”
“I know,” he smiled sadly. “They call it growing up or something.”

She did thump him this time.

They were lost each in their own thoughts again. This was something he could never do with Ron, just sit and think in comfortable silence. There was one point he had left out so far he realised suddenly.

“How’s your Occlumency going?” he asked startling her.

She blinked at him. “How did you know?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” she smiled sheepishly, “it’s progressing well enough I suppose. The yoga breathing exercises my mother does seem to help actually. You should try them as well.”

“No need,” he grinned. “It looks like I’m a natural.”

Hermione stared at him for several moments in complete disbelief before spluttering, “...and what was that with Snape?”

“If you ask me, I’d say it’s because Snape was the one teaching me. My brain simply refused to take any directions from him.”

He saw her swell putting her hands on her hips and continued quickly.

“And it’s not like he had been actually teaching me in the first place!”

She considered it for a moment.

“Are you spurting theories of conspiracy á la Ron now, too?”

“No, Ron sees only evil Slytherins slash Death Eaters everywhere. I say Snape acted on Dumbledore’s orders.”

“Hm,” she commented furrowing her brows. It did make sense she had to admit.

Harry saw Madam Pomfrey stepping out of her office and removed the privacy ward.

“Mr. Potter, you are still here, it’s almost curfew!”

“I’m on my way, Madam.” He turned back to Hermione. “Good night I suppose, unless this mess is going to give you nightmares.”

“When is anything concerning you not giving me nightmares, may I ask?”

“I’m wounded,” he pouted adorably, holding his hand to his heart on the way to the door.

“Good night, Harry,” she called after him shaking her head at his antics. Grown up or not, he was still her little brother.

xxxooooxxx

Severus was marking the last of the end of year exam papers in his office when the wards informed him that one of his fifth-year students was standing before the door.
“Come in!” he answered the knock and looked up putting his quill aside. “Mr. Nott, have a seat.”

“Good evening, sir,” the young man took a chair before the desk. “There is a problem I need your help with.”

Severus nodded for him to continue already guessing the subject of this discussion. He may have been Head of house only for a year during the last war, but that was more than enough to give him an inkling of the consequences the children had to bear.

“As you know, my father was convicted two days ago,” Nott proceeded without emotion. “Unfortunately, I have no other close relatives, who could take guardianship of me. Due to my near maturity though, the Ministry has allowed me to stay at my home over the summer, on the condition that an adult takes the responsibility in loco parentis. I wanted to ask, if you could spare time to do it, sir.”

“Of course, Mr. Nott,” Severus opened a drawer and took out the proper forms he had already requested four days earlier.

“I will be visiting about once a week to ensure your continuing wellbeing,” he informed him while filling them out. Nott didn’t even blink at the fact that he had them at hand. Contrary to some of his colleagues, Severus knew very well that the boy was far from stupid. Signing and sealing them he made two copies, giving one to Nott and putting the other away.

“I will send them in immediately.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nott rose to leave. There was no need for arse kissing and never had been with Severus. “Good evening,” he bowed and he let himself out.

Severus sighed rubbing the bridge of his nose.

So it has begun.

He only hoped Aurora would manage alright after his departure. He had specifically insisted with Dumbledore that the position was to go to her and not Slughorn, who was coming back to teach Potions next year. The Headmaster had been displeased, but only mildly, so he was quite sure his wishes were going to be followed. If this was the last thing he could do for his Slytherins, then so be it.
Harry was rummaging around his trunk to find the best place to hide the roll of Pound notes Neville had given him yesterday, when a messily wrapped package caught his eye. He took it out wondering where it had come from, when it hit him. Sirius had thrust it into his hands before leaving for Hogwarts last Christmas with the instructions to open it only when alone. He had completely forgotten about it!

Carefully, he unwrapped it finding a mirror and a note inside. A two-way mirror, Sirius’ untidy writing informed him, he had used it to talk to his father on separate detentions. Harry balled his fists scrunching up the note in the process. An undetectable way to communicate with his godfather had lain around in his very trunk all this time!

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath emptying himself of all emotions, then wrapped the creased note and the mirror again and put them away. He was not going to throw the bloody thing against the wall! It was one of the last gifts his godfather had given him.

In a little used part of the castle, not far from the north tower, Ginny was sitting curled up in an alcove, her face wet from recent tears. She and Michael had one hell of a row this morning. He was still moping around about the lost match against Gryffindor and she had absolutely no patience left for his stupidity. One word had led to another and ended finally with a Bat-Bogey Hex. Though this had been coming for some time she had to admit.

She sighed heavily drying her face with her sleeves. In the end it all came down to Harry. She had started the whole thing to get over him in the first place, obviously without success, since she had never been able to allow Michael to touch her. Oh, she knew very well what the girls in her dorm were giggling about behind her back, and Michael had told it to her face just an hour ago.

‘You frigid prude! Think because you’re pretty you’re above the common mortal?’

In her heart of hearts she knew without doubt that Harry would never see anything more in her than a friend, yet couldn’t help harbouring this small hope that maybe one day...

No! Enough!

Her eyes hardened in determination. This had gone on long enough, she needed to know now and for all times or go insane. She took her wand and a small mirror out of her pocket and cleaned her face, before applying a touch of make-up. Unlike most of the girls her age, she knew very well that sometimes less was more. She opened her braid and let the rich, red locks cascade freely down her shoulders and back. She looked herself over smirking.

Pretty, she snorted, no, she was beautiful! If Harry should refuse her now, then her suspicions would be confirmed beyond doubt and he was not interested in girls at all.

One more thing though, being poor had the side effect of making you quite proficient in clothing transfiguration. She concentrated and a moment later her school uniform turned into a long-sleeved, emerald green dress hugging her figure pleasantly, flowing all the way down to the ground. After a bit of consideration she let her simple shoes alone, only changing the colour to match.

Thus attired Ginny stepped out of the alcove. After checking her reflection in the next best set of armour she turned around and looked directly into the grey, slightly widened eyes of Draco Malfoy.
Harry sat alone and brooding in the Gryffindor common room. The sunny weather had most of his schoolmates outside on the grounds, playing games or lazing around, enjoying the last carefree days of school. He on the other hand, could not shake off the strange mood hanging over him like a dark cloud, overshadowing his thoughts ever since he had found that stupid mirror. He had believed himself to be over Sirius’ death and ready to move on, obviously he wasn’t yet. He sighed rubbing his face and decided to take a walk around the castle. It had always helped to clear his mind in the past.

Outside the portrait hole he looked up surprised, hearing hurried footsteps coming towards him. Ginny hastened around the corner and stopped short of bumping right into him. She looked very beautiful he found. Her long dress flowed around her showing off her delicate frame. The red hair fell elegantly down her back. Her lovely face was flushed slightly and the big hazel eyes were looking at him startled. He smiled at her pleasantly.

“Oh... Harry... erm, hi!” she stammered.

“Had a nice morning I see,” he teased amicably.

“Oh, lucky is the bastard who she had been with, indeed!”

She blushed deeply spluttering.

“Don’t worry,” he patted her on the arm with a mischievous grin. “My lips are sealed.”

He winked at her and went on not noticing the sadness in the eyes following him.

Harry wandered through the empty halls with no particular destination in mind, still smiling slightly at Ginny’s embarrassment. But these pleasant thoughts were soon replaced by the heavy, depressive ones, making him gloomy again. He ended up on the windowsill in Fluffy’s chamber, where he watched the sun disappear behind the horizon, not even bothering with lights when the darkness fell at last.

“Here you are.”

He startled violently and looked up seeing Luna standing right in front of him, holding a lit candle for some reason, instead of using her wand.

“Yes, here I am,” he sighed and slid over to make room for her. Had it been someone else he would have found an excuse by now, but with her he just didn’t feel the need to pretend, and never had for that matter.

“Are you feeling guilty?” she asked bluntly.

Harry considered it for a moment.

“Yes and no I suppose,” he answered her. “It was my stupidity that had brought this on, undoubtedly, but...” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, “it wasn’t that alone. Others had played their part as well, Sirius himself among them.”

Luna smiled at that dreamily. “What is it that you regret the most then?”

Harry blinked taken by surprise. This was actually something he had yet to find out. He thought back
trying to pursue the chain of events in reverse order, watching the small flame flicker and dance in Luna’s hand.

He had lost the blinders he had been wearing here in this very room. He did not regret it though, even if his life would have been far easier then.

*The prophecy?* No, he had no influence on fate whatsoever, so there was nothing to regret.

*The loss of the last shreds of childhood when I’ve cast the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix?* Harry pondered it a bit, then shook his head. No.

Endangering his friends? *...no, it was their decision to make.*

*Going to the Ministry in the first place?* He sighed heavily, yes, he did regret that, but it’s not like there had been another alternative...

His mind came abruptly to a halt making him furrow his brows. As a matter of fact there had been, he could have simply trusted Snape to take action without his own input.

Snape had been the only Order member still in the castle and very much available, too. He should have gone to him immediately, instead of trying to break into Umbridge’s office. Nothing of this would have happened then.

He would never make the same mistake again he swore silently and looked up into Luna’s bright eyes, which appeared eerie in the candlelight, feeling the weight lifting somewhat. He blinked noticing something strange all of a sudden. How on earth had she found him? Why was she looking for him at all?

“How did you know I was in need of help here?” he asked his mind racing.

Luna smiled dreamily. “The Wolundaras told me,” was her answer.

*A Seer? No, a Medium!* Of course, he almost hit himself on the forehead, how on earth hadn’t he noticed before!

“The Wolundaras, or the souls of the dead?” he smirked.

“You have a long and difficult way before you,” she said rising.

He put his hand on her arm looking directly into her eyes. “Thank you ...for everything.”

She nodded smiling and glided out, taking the light with her, leaving him to his thoughts.

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Ginny lay in her bed late at night and stared up at the canopy unable to sleep. Well, it had been an eventful day full of revelations, had it not?

Firstly, she could bury any hopes she may have had towards Harry once and for all. He was gay, full stop! Secondly, she truly should question her sanity. What in the name of Morgana had she been thinking? Doing *that* with Malfoy? It will be all over the school by tomorrow!

On the other hand, she sincerely doubted he would breathe even a word of it to anyone. Who was going to believe him honestly? She couldn’t believe it herself and she was the one who...

*Oh, Merlin!* She hid her burning face in her hands, but could not help smiling at the memory.
Draco had been standing there and staring at her, as if he had never seen her before, mouth half open and eyes slightly widened, artless admiration shining in them. He did look quite cute like that by the way. Completely enthralled by her, her, Ginevra Weasley! She would be lying if she said she had not been flattered. He did have a certain reputation after all.

For the first time in her life had she felt herself truly a woman and craved to test the limits of her power. Thus she had approached him smiling alluringly, while he hungrily watched her every movement, and slid her arms around his neck making his quickened breathing hitch.

Merlin, never before had she felt so sexy! Feeling him tremble slightly as he put his arms around her, seeing the flush on his usually pale cheeks and desire burning in the half-lidded eyes! She had wetted her lips and tilted her head up in invitation and it was all he had needed, crashing his mouth on hers forcefully, his tongue demanding entrance.

*Boy, he could kiss!*

Both of them had been flushed and breathless when parting for much needed air. She did not know about his, but her knees were definitely not as steady as before. It had never been like that with Michael! Ever! Frigid prude indeed, the throbbing between her legs had been telling a different story, as it was now actually.

She grabbed her wand and placed a privacy ward around her bed. Sliding her hand into her underwear, she started caressing her sensitive parts skilfully.

She had taken him by the hand and led him away from the main corridor. There had been this small, empty storage room not far ahead that she knew of. A simple Alohomora got them inside. After vanishing the dust and cobwebs they had turned to each other, both looking a bit unsure as to what they were actually going to do. All insecurity disappeared though, when they started kissing again. The hardness pressing into her hip told her more than enough, as did her soaked knickers him when he pulled her to the floor and pushed her long skirt up and out of the way before removing them.

The movement of her hand quickened as she remembered the sensation of his long slender fingers sliding through her slick folds, followed by his lips and tongue. Holy Merlin! He had reduced her to writhing and moaning within seconds! Never in her life had she felt such pleasure! Her fingers had combed his fine blond hair until she came actually screaming his name, as she did yet again to her own chagrin.

Ginny breathed heavily recovering from quite a powerful orgasm.

Oh, he had been smug about it! Of course he had, what man wouldn’t be? And she had known then that she had to wipe that smirk of his face or never hear the end of it. So, she had grabbed him and pulled him up into a kiss, then turned them over not breaking it and caressed his length through the cloth of his trousers, making him moan into her mouth. He was rock-hard already when she had opened them and pulled them down to his ankles together with his midnight-blue silk boxers.

She had crouched between his spread knees looking at his cock in fascination. Only a bit more than average she guessed, not too thick, but not too thin either, she liked it. Looking up she was met with his expectant gaze and smiled sultrily, bending down and taking one languid lick from the base to the weeping head, watching him. He had arched his back closing his eyes and moaning in pleasure. And there it was again, this feeling of feminine power. Liked it, didn’t he? Well, she hadn’t even started yet!

She took him into her mouth and proceeded to pleasure him to the best of her ability, glorying in the expressions on his face and the sounds he was making, moaning and spurting profanities. He was
almost there she recognised by the tension of his body and released him looking directly into his eyes, waiting.

“Ginny,” he had obviously gotten it at once. “Ginny, please...”

Well, since he had been so obliging, he had definitely deserved a bonus. Thus after resuming her ministrations, she relaxed her throat and took him as deep as he could possibly go, ignoring her own discomfort. The effect had been immediate. His whole body arched convulsively as he exploded down her throat with a roar.

Ginny in the curtained gloom of her bed followed him. Breathing heavily once again, she waited a few moments before clumsily taking her wand and trying to clean herself somewhat.

She had waited until he stopped pulsing, before coming up gulping for air and coughing ungainly, with tears in her eyes. Thankfully, Draco had seemed beyond notice. It had not been pleasant, but oh so worth it! Seeing him sprawled on the floor so completely butchered had given her a feeling of accomplishment she had never known before. No wonder he had been so smug, if she had looked like that as well.

Then it had hit her. She had sex with Draco Malfoy! Just like that! One moment thinking about Harry and the other spreading her legs for Draco! What the fuck... what the hell was wrong with her? Panicking she had grabbed her discarded knickers and ran, leaving him behind. She had spent the next hour in the girl’s bathroom on the sixth floor cleaning herself up and calming down, coming to terms with the fact that she had lost her “virginity” to Malfoy and had enjoyed it. She had tried to regret it, but found she couldn’t, especially after running into Harry outside of the portrait hole.

Ginny sighed and removed the privacy ward. What was there to misunderstand? Draco Malfoy, the Ice Prince of Slytherin, had dropped his well tailored pants rock-hard at the very sight of her, fully clothed she might add, while Harry Potter didn’t even take a second glance.

She turned to her side yawning and smiled at the images her mind provided. Whatever might come out of it, she was definitely over Harry now.

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Harry climbed the steps of the Astronomy tower in the early hours of the morning. An interesting idea inspired by Luna and her candle had entered his mind and refused to leave. Feeling a strange compulsion to try it out, he had decided it would do no harm to trust his instincts this time. Thus, he found himself faced with the glorious sight of the vast grounds presented in the tender light tinting the horizon, feeling the freshness of the morning breeze on his skin. It was beautiful! Just the perfect background for what he had in mind.

He made sure the platform was empty and warded the entrance carefully, before taking out a thick, black candle he had gotten from the house-elves in the kitchens and carving Sirius’ name into it. He lit it and placed it in a small niche in the balustrade to protect it from wind. Sitting down before it he simply started talking, telling it everything he had always wanted to tell Sirius, but never got to for one reason or another.

He had told it about the woes of his childhood, his years at Hogwarts, his adventures, his hopes and dreams, his falling out with Dumbledore, everything. Then apologised for the part he had played in causing his godfather’s death and promised to do everything in his power to prevent something like that from happening again.

Then he got angry all of a sudden and started screaming accusations. Sirius had promised him home
and family, he had not kept to his word. He was supposed to be the adult, but had never lived up to it. He had lied to him picturing himself and his father in the best colours only and downplayed the part they had played in humiliating others. Did he actually know how much it had hurt watching that in Snape’s memories? Watching his own father playing Dudley’s role?

He sat there for a while in silence, calming down. Then he swore vengeance, against Voldemort, because he was the source of everything bad that had happened in his life; against Bellatrix Lestrange for killing Sirius; and even against Dumbledore for using him and his godfather and everyone else close to him with no regards to their wellbeing.

Harry watched the candle burn down to the stub and go out having nothing left to say. Throwing the remains over the balustrade he headed to bed, feeling now most truly at peace.
Draco moaned and spilled himself all over his hand and stomach panting heavily. Lying there in the confinement of his curtained bed, he could not help feeling defeated. This was pathetic! No, scratch that, making a fool of himself in front of Potter and Longbottom had been pathetic, this... this was actually beyond pathetic! He had wanked off seven times today thinking about her. Seven! He usually didn’t wank that much in a whole week.

He cast a cleaning charm and tucked himself in, straightening his clothes. He should go down to the common room he knew, but could not bring his limbs to obey him. There was no denying it, yesterday he had experienced THE orgasm of his life. The seven he had today were nowhere even close. With Ginevra Weasley of all people! He had thought that he had dreamt it at first, coming to himself in that storage room. He had been so out of it that he had not even noticed when she had left, but the smears of lipstick on his cock were evidence enough to the contrary.

Oh, he knew very well what it had been all about. The sordid details of her break-up with Corner had been the topic number one in the gossip mills today. The girl had been up and about to make a statement and he had been the lucky bastard to cross her way.

"I was her first," he realised suddenly. If what he had heard was true, Corner had never touched her. A small smile tugged on his lips, the stupid berk will never know what he had lost out on!

Draco sighed rubbing the bridge of his nose. Fact remained though, that for him it had been not only mind-blowing sex, but actually an illumination. His rumoured reputation was just that, rumours. He had a betrothal contract with Pansy since childhood and his sense of honour had prevented him from seeking pleasure elsewhere, and even with Pansy he had done it only twice. He had not liked it all that much, hence had decided it was more trouble than worth.

Now he knew better. He had learned what a girl that truly enjoyed herself looked, felt and tasted like and could tell without doubt that Pansy had faked her orgasm both times. In return she had just sucked him off, nothing more nothing less, and it didn’t matter that she had offered constantly since, she did not want him.

All she wants is my money and standing. It wouldn’t be surprising, if she had a bit on the side tucked away somewhere actually.

He had to admit he had been stupid enough to believe that she honestly cared for him. It was one of the reasons he had stayed faithful to her for so long. Until a red-haired siren appeared out of nowhere and showed him what giving and receiving pleasure truly meant. He smiled remembering her flushed face in a halo of glorious red locks after she had come screaming his name. It had been the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, though watching her pleasuring him and liking it was coming quite close.

His cock gave an interested twitch again making him groan and push his pillow over his face.

This would not do! Not at all!

But what was he going to do about it? He put the pillow back under his head and stared up at the canopy.

He needed to get rid of Pansy, this he knew for sure. No frigging way was he going to marry a gold digging slut, no matter what his father had arranged for him.
And that was where the root of all his problems lay, was it not? Potter’s words ran through his mind once again, as did Severus’. He knew very well what both of them were trying to tell him, he was not stupid after all, and yet... He had always been so proud of his parents, had always tried to make them, his father especially, proud of him in return, to fulfil their expectations, as well as those of his peers.

But he was also proud to be a Malfoy, to be the Heir of his House. He had been taught the principles distinguishing his family since childhood and could therefore not help noticing while growing up that his father’s words and actions were not always in accord with them. As a matter of fact, they were often going into the completely opposite direction.

This was it he realised, the crossroads where his father’s interests and his own, as well as those of the House Malfoy, parted irrevocably. His father wanted him to pledge loyalty to the Dark Lord and take the Mark, going on and on about the honour and benefits it held, and being younger Draco had actually believed it. Now though he could clearly see that his father’s choices had brought only damage and disgrace, and no matter what he had told Potter two days ago, he’d rather not see his father again anytime soon. Beside that, Severus had dropped enough hints over the years to make him understand that serving the Dark Lord was actually not what Draco would want, and he was inclined to trust his godfather in this.

A Malfoy should seek to establish power of his own instead of feeding on crumbs falling from others’ tables!

Draco balled his fists in anger. His father had disgraced their House and it was now on him to bring it back to glory. And he would! It was his duty!

He deflated somewhat recognising that he would be alone.

No, not entirely.

Severus would stand by him, especially in this, he was quite sure, but sighed nonetheless. Severus was not enough, he needed more allies. However, no way in hell was he going to join Dumbledore, he was not that desperate!

A picture of Potter and Longbottom regarding him dispassionately entered his mind. ‘Don’t underestimate Potter’s power’ Severus had said.

Well, at least this is something worth looking into further.

But there was still the problem with Pansy. Looking at it objectively he honestly had not the slightest idea why his father had chosen her for him. The Parkinsons were neither overly wealthy nor influential and Pansy herself was nothing special in beauty or magical power either.

Blackmail?

It was a possibility. In this case he definitely needed to get rid of her. Unfortunately, it would not be that easy. The contract his parents had concluded with Pansy’s was magical, meaning it would come into full force as soon as he turned seventeen and was nearly unbreakable. The only thing he could do was to conclude a betrothal contract even more binding before his turning of age, in which case the prior one would turn invalid and burn to ashes. The Claim of Virgin Blood would suffice perfectly he knew, and was a very simple one at that. The only thing left to do was to find a willing bride.

A lovely flushed face framed by red hair came to mind making his cock stir. Well, Little Draco
obviously had his preferences straight. She is a Weasley he wanted to shout at it, but refrained. He was NOT going to have words with his own penis, thank you very much!

No need to be hasty he decided. His seventeenth birthday was still over eleven months away, more than enough time to consider his options.

Harry had been hiding in the library since lunch. It was not difficult seeing as there were only a couple Ravenclaws inside and Ron had detention for punching Michael Corner at breakfast. He was actually sorry to have missed that, due to sleeping until eleven. Ginny though seemed to take it all in stride and he had a suspicion that she had moved on already or maybe even before that, who knew? It was none of his business anyway, so he refrained from commenting.

He had received several letters today. An almost package came from Gringotts, which he was actually glad no one had seen, Ron in particular, containing a folder listing all his assets and possessions and a family tree. Well, it was not quite three million, only something over two, but he found it still ironic that he had been running around in rags almost all of his life and working like a house-elf, while he had sixty-three of them in his service. The Black family assets were not included yet and would not until Sirius’ will had been read he supposed.

The family tree was very fascinating. Harry was sure there wasn’t a family in the British wizarding world whose name was not on it. Anyway, he was pleased to discover that he must have been named after his grandfather on his father’s side, Herold Rufus Potter.

Another one was from Mrs. Longbottom with a recommendation of one Mr. Lavenius Garner from Garner & Briggs. After penning a short thank you note to her Harry had spent the better part of the next hour composing his inquiry. Believe it or not, there was a special form for it, as Neville had told him thankfully. He had found “Forms and Formalities: a Guide” in the Etiquette section and had hopefully avoided embarrassing himself to the bone.

The third one was a request of his presence in the Headmaster’s office after dinner from his Head of house. He was not sure what to make of it, but guessed Dumbledore wanted to inform him about his arrangements for the summer and did not grace it with further thought.

His to-do list needed revision he found, since he had made quite a bit of progress with it already. So he wrote the unfinished points on a new parchment, added a few more and even sectioned them into ‘summer’ and ‘next year’. Quite proud of his achievement he banished the old one and proceeded to the Owlery. It was almost dinner.

His plans for the summer consisted mostly of revision, since there would be nothing else to do. He doubted he would be allowed to leave the house, even if he had found a fool-proof way to keep the Dursleys off his back. With or without his Inner Circle, the threat of Voldemort was now more tangible than ever and he’d rather not push his luck. He had ordered his own subscription of the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler to keep up with the news, as Hermione had advised long ago, though the latter was more for his own amusement than anything else. Thank Merlin Hermione was still restricted by her injury or she would have had his new study schedule done and ready by the Leaving Feast.

Theodore was pleased to finally receive the confirmation from the Ministry this morning. He had been getting concerned, since he would leave the day after tomorrow and the prospect of spending the summer in a muggle orphanage did not appeal to him at all. Especially considering the plans he
had spent long hours finalizing and making preparations for.

He smiled dreamily. He would break the shackles constricting him once and for all and avenge his sweet Hermione in the process.

_This is going to be good_, he chuckled, _they will never know what hit them._

And it didn’t matter that his Hermione would never know either, he had promised her and he would keep his word, even if it was the last thing he would do. Though he did not believe it would come to that. He had planned for most eventualities carefully. If things got out of control, he still could use brutal force and plead self-defence afterwards. He doubted the Aurors would ask too many questions either way.

_Death Eaters are good Death Eaters, eh?_ He grinned and winked at no one rubbing his hands, then straightened up and made his way out of the loo, suddenly remembering something.

He had planned to make one last visit to Hermione tonight and it would not do to come empty-handed. There was still more than enough time before curfew thankfully.

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Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk and watching Severus and Minerva snap at each other over Harry, as they usually did. Minerva was still angry with him he knew and thus wisely kept his amusement to himself, while waiting for the subject in question to make an appearance. At half past six the gargoyle informed him that Harry was on the way up, which was confirmed by a knock.

“Come in.”

Harry entered greeting them. He looked better than expected Dumbledore had to admit, though obviously still mourning, isolating himself from his friends at meals and in general the portraits had informed him.

“Come and sit down, my boy,” he gestured at the empty chair between the Professors. “Tea? Sherbet lemon?”

“No, thank you, sir,” Harry seemed annoyed. What did they all have against his beloved confection? He chuckled inside taking one himself.

“Well, Harry, as you have probably guessed already, I have asked you here to discuss your placement for the summer. As usual, you will have to return to the Dursleys’, even though it will be only for a month.”

Harry nodded uninterested and looked away. Dumbledore furrowed his brows having expected vehement protests, but continued nonetheless.

“On your birthday I will come personally to retrieve you to minimise the risk of a sudden attack. The rest of the summer you will be able to spend at Grimmauld Place. Most of the Weasleys will be there by that time as well,” he smiled benevolently.

Harry looked up at him confused. “Sir, isn’t it unsafe to use the house now?”

“No, my boy, Sirius had leased the house to the Order for the next fifty years. The contract is still valid, even after his passing, so there is nothing to fear, but Kreacher had to be euthanized unfortunately. His behaviour got out of control to the point of turning dangerous. Mrs. Weasley assured me though, that she will manage.”
No one commented leaving him to continue.

“The reading of Sirius’ will is set at ten o’clock on Friday the fifth of June. I will accompany you to Gringotts about half past nine on the day in question and back to your relatives afterwards.”

Harry nodded at this gravely. “Sir, I was asking myself for a while, but what has happened to my parents’ wills?”

Dumbledore blinked surprised. It looked like the boy had been doing a lot of thinking lately. This was not good indeed, but nothing serious enough to be concerned about he supposed.

“They were read two weeks after their deaths, as it is required by law, leaving almost everything to you,” he informed the boy. “Alas, as the appointed guardians, your godfather Sirius Black and your godmother Mary McDonald were in prison in one case and dead in the other, the guardianship fell to the closest living relative, your aunt Petunia Dursley.”

“Can I have a look at them as well when we go to Gringotts next week?”

He was cursing the boy and his persistence in six different languages and could have sworn to have seen a glint of amusement in Severus’ eye, if only for a moment. Fact was that he would rather have lied, but with Minerva sitting right in front of him there was no way he would get away with it.

“But of course, I will arrange for it subsequent to the main reading,” he managed to smile.

“There is something else I have been meaning to talk to you about, Harry,” he changed his demeanour to convey a slight disappointment. “It has come to my attention that you wish to sue the Daily Prophet for compensation.”

However, it was lost on the boy, who lit up nodding eagerly. “Yes, I’ve already contacted a solicitor.”

“You have?” Dumbledore shifted in his chair uneasily. He could clearly see that damn glint not only in Severus’ but also in Minerva’s eye. “May I ask who?”

“Mr. Garner from Garner & Briggs. I’ve heard he is the best for that sort of thing,” Harry informed him all innocence.

Knowing that himself he had a hard time to decide, if he should strangle or complement him. The boy continued though.

“Can you tell me how much a solicitor usually takes, sir, so I can estimate the cost?”

He was about to open his mouth to tell the bloody brat that it would be more than he could afford, but Severus beat him to it.

“Five Galleons a week, plus barrister and court fees,” he drawled condescendingly. “It is common practise to collect five per cent premium on the sum of the acquired compensation as well, I understand.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said neutrally turning back to him, looking as if he expected a pat on the head.

Dumbledore was seething inside, but faked a grandfatherly smile rather convincingly.

“That would be all, my boy. You may go.”
Harry rose smiling politely, made his farewells and disappeared through the door.

After dismissing Minerva and Severus as well he sighed heavily, accepting that nothing could be done there anymore. He had punished Severus already and Harry had done nothing wrong from his point of view.

He truly should keep a better eye on him in the future. He was older and less predictable now. No use to cry over spilled milk though, not that this change would lead to any damage in the first place, it was rather the loosened leash he was worrying about. Thankfully, it was nothing that could not be remedied if the need arose, which he sincerely doubted would ever be the case.

Worries put to rest the Headmaster took up his paperwork. He was a far too busy man to waste his time on considering unlikely possibilities.
The sun was shining cheerfully through the high windows of the hospital wing when Hermione decided she had lain in enough, or rather the rumbling of her stomach decided it for her. Nonetheless, she was happy to notice that she had an appetite again. The long treatment with the Tissue Knitting Potion had the effect of curbing it almost entirely. Madam Pomfrey had promised to allow her to join the Leaving Feast tonight on the condition that she’d take it easy on the rich food, and return back here afterwards.

She turned on her back and stretched languidly, very happy to be finally able to do that as well. Then, a glimpse of scarlet caught the corner of her eye and she sat up to investigate it. A dozen most luscious, red roses she had ever seen sat on her bedside table in a simple crystal vase. There was no card, but since they had not been there yesterday when she went to sleep, it was not hard to guess who they were from. She looked around to make sure she was alone, before getting closer to breathe in their scent... sweet, but unobtrusively so... perfect.

She sighed feeling her insides melt and unable to help it. She had received heaps of sweets and get well cards, but no one, not even Harry, had thought of bringing her flowers. She was a girl, all right! A very rational and practical one, yes, but still a girl! She wanted all that stuff too, you know, the flowers, the chocolates, the perfume, the jewellery... How hard was that to get?

This was it, she decided she did not care that he was a Slytherin, a son of a Death Eater and not quite right in the head. As long as he kept doing this, he was most welcome to her hair, her face, her body and her heart.

Neville woke up in the gloom of the deep blue bed curtains with Luna’s comforting weight half on his chest. They had sneaked into her dorm last evening, because she had complained about cold stone walls and floors. It had been far easier than he had expected, but having the greater part of the common room with their heads in a book was of enormous advantage he supposed. He caressed her long hair lovingly noting that it was stuck between dirty blonde and flax now. It would turn completely white shortly after her seventeenth birthday he knew, revealing her powers to the world.

Luna raised her head suddenly and shifted so she was entirely on top of him, before folding her arms on his chest and putting her chin on them, regarding him curiously. He noticed her eyes had now more silver in them as well when he cupped her face with both his hands and bent forward to kiss her on the forehead, as a form of morning greeting.

“You love me,” she stated just like that. Neville smiled amused. There was no hiding from oneself in her presence indeed.

“I will ask grandmother to organise a betrothal contract for us,” he told her straight away, then pouted, “unless you are a cruel witch and have been just out to break my heart all this time.”

She smiled and kissed him, which was answer enough he supposed... or maybe not when he felt her slender hand wrap around his morning wood...

Harry was pursuing the morning paper in an excellent mood, no Death Eater activity so far and he was still basking in the glory of yesterday’s triumph. More so, unless he had imagined it, for
whatever reason Snape seemed to be not quite pleased with the Headmaster at the moment. This was
good, very good even! Of all Dumbledore’s henchmen Snape was by far the most dangerous. If only
he could learn what had caused it... to drive them further asunder, or dare he hope... to gain Snape’s
loyalty for himself.

_Not in this lifetime, or any lifetime for that matter,_ he chuckled to himself. But there might be a
realistic possibility for them to at least come to an understanding. It was definitely worth a try.

He put the paper aside and looked over to Ron and Ginny sitting across from him. “Want to go and
visit Hermione? Unless you’ve got yourself detention again,” he added smiling innocently.

“It was bloody unfair!” Ron protested, “I’ve been defending my sister’s honour!”

“You’re sister is perfectly capable of defending herself, brotherkins,” Ginny shot at him dragging him
up and away from the table. “And she had dealt with the problem a day before already. No need for
you to put in your five Knuts.”

Harry followed them shaking his head, then looked back remembering Neville, but was unable to see
him anywhere. Looking over to the Ravenclaw table and not seeing Luna there either he decided
he’d better not know and went on.

Ron and Ginny were bickering all the way to the hospital wing, leaving Harry to wonder yet again
how on earth they had survived each other since childhood and during every summer holidays.
Thankfully, they shut up entering Madam Pomfrey’s domain.

Hermione was sitting on the bed with a book as usual, but it was the dozen red roses sitting on her
bedside table, which caught his eye first.

“Ohhh...” Ginny bent down to smell them before plopping herself on the bed and pocking Hermione
in the ribs. “Now spill it, girl, I want all the sordid details, and don’t tell me those are from an old
friend or something!”

Harry looked over to Ron and could clearly see a storm was about to break, Hermione though
seemed not to care.

“Old friend,” she snorted turning to them with a playful glare, “I’ll be old myself before I get even a
daisy out of them.”

“Who are they from?” It was delivered as a demand. Harry exchanged a look with Ginny and was
about to say something to ease the tension, but Hermione had obviously other things in mind.

“My boyfriend,” she stated simply, her face neutral.

“And who may that be?”

“Do you really think I’m going to tell you, Ron?” she asked angrily. “So you can go after him and
try your fists against him, or your wand?” She straightened crossing her arms and looked at him
down her nose. “What’s your problem anyway? If you truly had any feelings for me, it would be
your roses over there and not his.”

Ron balled his fists and stormed out with Harry on his heels. “Ron...”

“Leave me alone!” he snapped back and was through the door before Harry could reach him.

Madam Pomfrey appeared in her office door. “What is going on here?” She regarded them
disapprovingly searching for potential trouble.

“Nothing Madam,” Harry returned to Hermione’s bed sitting down.

Madam Pomfrey huffed, but let it be going back to her work to their relief.

“Was it really necessary?” Harry asked her.

“It was,” Hermione stated forcefully, “it has been long in coming. He doesn’t want me, but he
doesn’t want anyone else to have me either.” She turned to Ginny. “How in Merlin’s name are you
dealing with him?”

“Bat-Bogey Hex,” Ginny informed her smirking.

Harry could not help laughing with them.

xxxoooxxx

Ron chose to sit as far away from Hermione as possible that evening. Completely over the top Harry
found, but normal for him when in a snit. He sighed taking the last of his treacle tart. He would give
him an evening to cool off before trying to talk some reason into him, hoping against hope that it
would have some effect. Ron had definitely a lot of growing up to do, but Harry decided not to give
up on him yet, five years of friendship were still what they were.

The entire atmosphere, though festive, was not the same as it once was either. On some level
everyone seemed to be aware that the world they were going back to tomorrow was not safe
anymore. Dumbledore’s speech was a call for unity and could not have been more hypocritical in
Harry’s opinion, seeing as he had given the House Cup to Gryffindor again, despite Ravenclaw
being in the lead by the end of day.

He looked over to the Ravenclaw table and could see quite a few angry faces there. All for the better
though. The more people he insults, the more willing allies for me.

Politics aside, he was darn curious about Hermione’s boyfriend. No matter how hard he and Ginny
had tried they were unable to get it out of her. This lead to the conclusion that she was either
embarrassed or unsure of their reaction, and since Hermione was not one to be embarrassed about
her own boyfriend, it meant he must be a Slytherin. Harry decided if this was indeed the case, he was
alright with it, but knew as well that no way in hell Ron would ever accept that. It did not matter
though, because he had already chosen his side should a conflict arise in the near future, and it was
definitely not Ron’s.

xxxoooxxx

Next morning however it turned out that Ron did need a bit more than just one evening.

As if anticipating a talking to from him, he rose uncharacteristically early to finish the last of his
packing and get on the way to breakfast long before Harry even stirred. Dean and Seamus absolutely
amazed by this kept on pestering him until Harry saw no other way but simply tell them, which had
led to a lot of snickering and head shaking on their part. Harry only hoped that the news would take
their time until the next year to spread or Hermione was going to have his head.

After breakfast Harry, Neville, Ginny and Luna waited up for Hermione to share a carriage to the
station. She appeared carrying her roses still in the vase, telling them it would be a shame to throw
them away and not giving a damn about the curious glances she received. Harry could only applaud
her. The ride was less comfortable than it had been in the previous years, with five almost grown
people squeezed together, but thankfully quite short. Wading through the crowd trunks and pet-cages in hand they chose an empty compartment at the end of the train and settled in. Crookshanks was occupying the last empty seat, which was observed with a few sad glances.

“Don’t you feel guilty about this,” Ginny snorted. “He’s behaving like an absolute arse. Not worth much regrets, if you ask me.”

Neville nodded. “There is truly not much you can do here. He’s the one with the issues, not the two of you.” He put his arm around Luna, who leaned into his shoulder opening the latest Quibbler and promptly turning it upside down.

“We’ll need to make our rounds together later,” Hermione sighed. “It’s going to be fun I can tell.”

“I could go with you,” Harry offered.

“No, it’s alright, but thank you. Professors McGonagall and Snape are accompanying the train, so it should be pretty quiet anyway.”

They settled on wizard chess and Exploding Snap to pass the time, until the witch with the lunch-cart arrived interrupting them. Buying an almost obscene amount of sweets Harry returned into the compartment, dumping them on his own seat, before starting dealing out.

“What?” He smirked at their astonishment. “It’s going to be a long summer after all.”

Hermione left for her prefect duties soon afterwards. She was only halfway down the corridor when Ginny leaned over smirking conspiratorially.

“So, how about a betting pool on the sender of these?” she gestured at the roses. They all, even Luna, grinned wickedly digging for their coins.

xxxooooxxx

Draco felt the beginnings of a huge headache building in the region of his temples, sitting in a compartment with his friends and enduring Pansy draping her unwelcome self all over him. The talk was kept to plans for the summer and other inane things thankfully, he was not ready to risk testing out the political waters in his circle yet. Not that he hadn’t a notion of the outcome already.

Crabbe and Goyle were mere followers and would do what their fathers told them, no matter their affiliations at the moment. Pansy belonged to the same category. Blaise and Daphne though he had the notion would rather want to stay out of this whole mess, if they could. It was therefore likely, if he presented it just right, that they would see things his way and join him on the neutral side, neutral because he had decided it would be the safest one in the upcoming conflict. Others in his year, like Moon, Bulstrode and Nott, he didn’t know well enough to consider.

He looked towards the door just in time to see Weasley stomp past their compartment sporting a scowl. He wondered for a moment why he wasn’t with Potter and Granger somewhere, before remembering the latest bit of gossip this morning. Apparently, the mudblood had decided she could do far better than Ronald Weasley. Draco could only congratulate her on showing good taste. She was a powerful witch after all and pretty enough for a mudblood, though he probably should stop using the M-word in public, if he was going to try and gain Potter’s support he supposed.

Then he remembered something else and stood up suddenly ignoring Pansy’s protests. “We need to make our rounds,” he told Daphne and made his way out, holding in his sigh of relief.

xxxooooxxx
They arrived at King’s Cross far too soon in Harry’s opinion, even with the idea that this summer might actually turn out somewhat enjoyable. Nothing for it though and they carefully made their way through the masses. Neville spotted his grandmother and he and Luna took their leave with promises to stay in contact. Harry supposed he wanted to introduce his fiancée to her properly. Oh, to be the fly on the wall to witness the old lady’s face he smirked to himself.

Ginny tugged on his sleeve to point at the group of redheads standing with Tonks and Moody close to the exit, so they grabbed their luggage and followed the stream of bodies towards them. Ron was already there moving out of the way when Mrs. Weasley greeted them all with a hug and asked after their wellbeing, thankfully not noticing the scowl he graced Hermione with. Harry was slowly getting really annoyed at his stupidity, but refrained from showing it in front of his parents.

They waited a bit for the crowd to dissipate, before moving through the barrier and immediately saw the Grangers standing not far away. His own relatives were taking their time it seemed. After talking for a while they finally made their farewells. Hermione gave him and Ginny a big hug, ignoring Ron entirely. Mrs. Weasley did notice this time, but did not say anything, only looked between them questioningly. Harry had seen Ginny mouth “later” to her though.

The Dursleys appeared about half an hour too late, Harry reckoned to avoid meeting any wizards by chance, too bad for them in this case. He received one last hug from Ginny and Mrs. Weasley making a point to say goodbye to Ron as well, getting only a mumbled one in return. Better than nothing he supposed collecting his trunk and Hedwig’s cage and making his way towards his relatives. Surprisingly, Tonks, Moody and Mr. Weasley followed him.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,” Mr. Weasley addressed them, “Arthur Weasley is my name. We already had the pleasure of meeting two years ago, if you remember.”

The Dursleys only stared at him completely taken aback and looked around rather uncomfortable to be seen talking to this strange assortment of people in public. Mr. Weasley seemed unaffected though, looking them directly in the eyes.

“Well, it has come to our attention that your treatment of your nephew, Harry, here leaves much to be desired and we have decided a warning is in order.”

Vernon Dursley spluttered turning purple at this. “Are you threatening us, sir?”

Moody stepped forward and lifted his bowler hat a bit to size them up with his magical eye, making the Dursleys blanch and step back in fright.

“I believe we are,” Mr. Weasley said with a rather uncharacteristic hardness in his voice. “We do understand each other then?”

The Dursleys nodded swallowing visibly. Mr. Weasley smiled returning to his usual self.

“Very well, I wish you a good day, and a good summer to you, Harry.”

“Thank you, sir, and goodbye;” Harry took their hands and followed his almost fleeing aunt and uncle to the car.

It was touching to know that they cared enough to interfere, yet Harry could not help feeling a bitter aftertaste. It was, like many other things this year, far too late.
A Good Start

The drive back to Privet Drive had been rather quiet and uneventful giving Harry time to consider how exactly to proceed with his relatives. In the end he decided that the direct approach was the best when dealing with these kind of people and after leaving his things in his room went down to the kitchen.

Dudley seemed to be out somewhere, while uncle Vernon was sitting at the table and arguing with aunt Petunia, who was busy with dinner preparations. They both grew silent after noticing him standing in the doorway.

Harry went over to the kitchen counter, took out the four fifty Pound notes he had prepared beforehand, and arranged them neatly on it, right under their staring eyes.

“My grocery money,” he informed them with a sneer. “I’m going to stay here only until my birthday and don’t want to do any work in this household ever again.”

Uncle Vernon spluttered in disbelief, aunt Petunia though only blinked once before sweeping the money off the counter, folding it and putting it away in the pocket of her apron.

“Dinner is ready in half an hour,” she informed him snappily.

Taking it for a dismissal Harry nodded and left for his room. Everything said and done it was all quite uncomplicated indeed.

xxxoo0xxx

Theodore took enormous gratification in sitting in his father’s chair after dinner with a glass of his father’s best Firewhiskey. Stretching his legs out, he made a point of putting them straight on his father’s beloved footstool.

This... this was good he decided, just the thing he had always craved, beside a certain bushy-haired know-it-all that is. Smiling drunkenly he opened his trousers with his free hand and took out his already half-hard cock, stroking it lazily.

Yes, a gorgeous, hazel-eyed muggleborn on her knees smiling naughtily, before taking him into her sweet little mouth would be just the thing. Leaning back he closed his eyes, imagining exactly that, while speeding up his ministrations.

“Oh yes... harder... ahh... just like that... ohh, fuck... yes... almost there... oh, Mione... Mione... HERMIONE!”

Calming down somewhat he knocked the last of his drink back, before putting the tumbler on the side table and taking up his wand to clean himself. Tomorrow...

He got up swaying slightly, then did his trousers and started unsteadily towards his room. He would set things in motion tomorrow.

xxxoo0xxx

The first week of holidays flew by almost unnoticeably. Dumbledore should be here in half an hour Harry assumed and went down to warn aunt Petunia accordingly. All in all, he was glad for this interruption in his newly established routine, though rereading all his schoolbooks, beginning with
first year, had turned out less tedious than he had expected. Particularly, because he had stumbled upon quite a few useful little spells here and there, which could be applied in battle to great advantage, if done so cleverly.

His aunt was not pleased, but as there was nothing to be done for it, decided to simply ignore the pending visit on the thought that it would be short anyway. Harry reasoned it was probably in his best interest not to tell her that wizards were standing guard over her house at all times actually, but he did inform her of the appointment he had arranged with Mr. Garner on Monday following.

“What would you need a solicitor for?” she asked unable to help her usual nosy self.

“The Daily Prophet you know, the main paper of the wizarding world...” here he ignored her flinch “...had been printing a lot of rubbish about me almost the entire last year. I’ve decided to sue them for compensation.”

She blinked at that, her thin eyebrows rising. “You can do that being still a minor?”

“Yeah,” Harry told her surprised at her interest. “There’s no age limit on being able to engage legal representation as long as one is able to afford it.” The same went for opening an account at Gringotts for that matter. Those pamphlets were absolutely brilliant! No wonder Dumbledore had not wanted him to get his hands on them.

Her eyes turned calculating all of a sudden. “Can you apply for emancipation?”

Harry smirked amused. “Unfortunately, no. There is no such thing as premature emancipation in the wizarding world.” Seeing her upturn her nose he decided to explain. “I don’t know if mum ever told you, but there’s actually a reason we turn of age at seventeen. To be precise, it happens the exact minute of birth and not simply on the same day.”

Believe it or not, but for all her display of aversion towards anything magical, aunt Petunia seemed actually very much interested in hearing what he had to say.

“Every magical human being is born with a magical core, which emits a certain... well, aura if you want to call it that. To make it simple, the first seventeen years of our life we have an aura of a child, after that it changes suddenly to an aura of an adult, and because all things concerning inheritance are usually bound not only to blood but also to an adult aura, wizards can inherit anything only after turning seventeen.”

Those pamphlets were worth gold in his opinion. Aunt Petunia took it in thoughtfully.

“Is it why there was no provision made for your upbringing with us? No one had access to what your parents had left for you?”

Harry blinked amazed, not having expected of her to put so much thought into it. Feeling like clearing things up between them once and for all, he answered truthfully.

“No, my parents had left more than enough for me in my trust vault,” he looked her directly in the eyes. “Dumbledore withheld the money to ensure you would bring me up exactly as you did.”

She stared at him in shocked silence for a while, until the doorbell rang making them both jump. Harry looked over to the clock and went to let Dumbledore in.

“I’ll be back sometime before dinner I suppose,” he called over his shoulder. Whatever may come out of it, it had felt good not to walk on eggshells around her anymore.
Dumbledore had apparated them to the landing area in the backyard of the Leaky Cauldron and they made their way through the morning crowd in the main street of Diagon Alley. And of course they were so unnoticeable with Dumbledore in his customary garish garb! He should be used to it by now he supposed, but would be lying if he said it didn’t bother him anymore to be stared at like that. Snippets of whispered conversations caught his ear, making it hard to keep his composure.

What the fuck did they all want from him anyway? He was bloody fifteen and very far from being out of school at this point! Occlumency shields firmly in place he met their stares with a mask of boredom, pleased to notice that it seemed to unnerve them more than anything else. No wonder Snape got a kick out of messing with people’s minds.

Nonetheless, he was very glad to finally get into Gringotts and away from the unwanted attention. The goblins at least were as unpleasant as always. Who would have thought he’d learn to appreciate that? They were led to a meeting room of sorts and took seat at the oval-shaped table, greeting the people already sitting there. Tonks sat next to a woman he could have mistaken for Bellatrix Lestrange, if not for the sheer fact that no one else reacted to her negatively.

Andromeda Black Tonks, he realised. She did indeed look not much different from her sister, except for the actual warmth in her posture and face, and a slightly lighter hair colour he supposed. Then it hit him. With him being the future Head of House Black they were his responsibility now, as were Narcissa Black Malfoy and Draco Malfoy for that matter.

The books that Neville had sent him as promised were very illuminating as to the actual power and duties a Head of House had towards his own family and all other members of his House. And there were a lot of things to be done in that quarter, which Sirius most likely had no authority to do in his time, due to his outlaw status. Now though, with his name cleared officially, Harry would be able to see to his wishes even before his turning of age, on condition that Sirius had specified so in his will. He really hoped he had!

Then, he became aware of Dumbledore sitting right next to him. Damn! He had hoped to play the stupid, clueless boy for a bit longer, but this was something he just couldn’t ignore. It was his duty!

Harry looked further down the table. Remus was sitting hunched over close to them, looking absolutely pitiful. Merlin, he had completely forgotten about him! What he must be going through!

He got up ignoring the curious looks from the other people he definitely did not know and went over to Remus, embracing him from behind, unable to think of anything to say. Remus stiffened at first, but after realising who it was turned around and buried his face in Harry’s midsection, putting his arms around his waist. Harry simply stood there and let him cry running his hand through his greying hair soothingly. He was very much aware that this should have been the other way around, but assumed the wolf inside did recognise him as a superior in strength, maybe even as an alpha. In that case he should integrate Remus into his ‘pack’ so to speak, before Dumbledore got hold of him.

Precisely at ten o’clock the door opened and a delegation of five goblins came in, placing themselves on the so far empty other side of the table. Remus had calmed enough by that point to let go of Harry, who did not return to Dumbledore’s side though, looking sharply at the man who sat to Remus’ right instead. Getting the clue the man made place for him, taking the seat next over. Harry sat down and took Remus’ hand in his own under the table to secure the physical contact for the bonding to take hold, or so the werewolf section of his third year Defence text had specified. He was very glad now to have read it through only the day before.

After arranging his papers and setting up a dicto-quill the goblin in the middle cleared his throat to
get their attention.

“July the fifth, 1996. The official reading of the last will of one Sirius Orion Black, Lord and Head of House Black, is hereby opened. The officials present, Thorneye, Head of Department of Inheritance, Warhammer and Ironfist, secretaries to the Head, Willowstaff and Clawhook, undersecretaries. The beneficiaries present, Dumbledore, Albus; Gurney, Melissa; Lupin, Remus, Morgan, Patricius; Potter, Harry; Rivers, Maddoc; Tonks, Andromeda; Tonks Nymphadora; Vane, Patricia.”

Thorneye took a thick envelope and held it up showing the seal to be still intact, then broke it and unfolded the document.

“In death I, Sirius Orion Black, Lord and Head of House Black, currently under the status of an outlaw, do hereby bequeath to Melissa Gurney 200 Galleons to buy that silk dress and cloak I have promised her, but never came around to order; to Maddoc Rivers 500 Galleons I owe him for losing a bet; to Patricia Vane 1 000 Galleons for keeping my secret, even after all this time; to Patricius Morgan 1 000 Galleons he’ll know what for; to Albus Dumbledore a lifelong credit on Sherbet Lemons at Hugo’s where I know he usually orders them...” There were quite a few snickers here, even from Harry. “...to Remus Lupin 25 000 Galleons and the cottage at Cairn Hollow, yes, you are going to take those Moony or my ghost will come back to haunt you.” Harry held Remus’ hand firmer for comfort.

Now it comes, he supposed. “To my son in blood and Heir of House Black, Harry James Potter, I do hereby bequeath the entire House Black in assets, property and members of family to rule and manage as he sees fit...” Harry could see Dumbledore blanch out of the corner of his eye. “...and to ensure the wellbeing of the Tonks family from this moment on, according to his duty.”

There was a moment of silence with everyone present staring at Harry in shock. He refrained from squirming in his seat though, putting up his shields in full force.

Thorneye put the document away and addressed him directly. “Does the Heir wish to fulfil his duty now?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I, Harry James Potter, Heir of House Potter and Black, do hereby reinstall Andromeda Black Tonks and Nymphadora Tonks to the Black family. Furthermore, I order the dowry designated for Andromeda Black since childhood to be released to her immediately. The dowry for Nymphadora Tonks is to be designated with 30 000 Galleons, a full set of jewellery and a property both of her own choosing.”

And this was it, more he would not be able to do at this point, though he supposed it was more than enough. Thorneye handed the necessary papers to be signed and sealed with blood to him while closing the reading officially.

The unknown people in the room hastened out buzzing with excitement. Harry sighed heavily, already envisioning the tomorrow’s Prophet. He handed the papers back to the goblin and received a copy of Sirius’ will and one of his parents’ as requested beforehand.

Mrs. Tonks rose and curtsied, showing proper respect to her Head of House. “Thank you, my Lord!”

“You are welcome Mrs. Tonks, if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to bring it to my attention.” He got up and bowed to her in return. Tonks however just grabbed him and gave him a big noisy smooch on the cheek.

“Thank you, Harry, my Lord,” she sing-sang cheerily. “Bet all the guys are going to throw
themselves at me now!”

“I’m sure they will,” he smirked at her antics, “but don’t forget that all offers of marriage are still going through me, so be good or I’ll marry you off to some mug.”

She pouted at that, but let go of him and she and Mrs. Tonks took their leave.

Harry put his hand on Remus’ shoulder. “All right there?”

“Yes, thank you Harry,” he got up sighing. Harry could clearly see that he wasn’t though. He looked back and saw Dumbledore standing and waiting for them already. “Can we have some lunch somewhere, sir?”

“Yes, of course my boy, as a matter of fact I have booked a private room in the Leaky Cauldron beforehand.”

“Thank you, sir,” he took hold of Remus’ arm, “and you are coming with us. You look like you could use a good meal or two and a good night’s sleep for that matter,” he scolded him gently making sure to blend a bit of dominance into his voice. Deep inside he really hated himself for doing this, but the small voice of conscience was squashed rather quickly. It was too good an opportunity not to make use of. If he didn’t, Dumbledore would for sure he told himself, and Harry did actually care for Remus at least.

xxxoooxxx

With a look of intense concentration on his face Theodore stirred five times anticlockwise, before adding the powdered moonstone and repeating the procedure. The potion turned a light purple colour, just the one described in the instructions. Perfect! He attenuated the flame and covered the cauldron to let it simmer for the next 24 hours. Only nightshade blossom was left to add and it would be ready!

He sighed in relief putting the rod into the sink to wash and dry it, before applying the decontamination charms. He had spent the entire last week brewing, but not much longer now, and everything else was ready anyway, the house-elves instructed, the rooms prepared, the food chosen, only the poison was still in the making.

He could only congratulate himself on finding this one. It was very special and very, very old. It wasn’t a poison in itself, but turned into one under influence of stress hormones the body released under extreme pain. In the times of old it had been used as a suicide potion by wizards, who had delicate information on hand and wished to escape interrogation by torture. Absolutely brilliant!

Knowing from his father’s tales how much the Dark Lord loved the use of Cruciatus on anyone and everyone for any given reason, introducing this potion to his father’s system and that of his friends would ensure a quick demise. And the best of it, since it dissolved immediately after killing the victim, it would look like a simple heart failure to anyone but a Potions Master or a specialised Healer, who might detect a presence of a non-self substance, due to a too high sugar level in the blood.

He smiled dreamily heading for his rooms to take a shower before Professor Snape’s usual visit. He sincerely doubted Snape would reveal his findings to the Dark Lord, anyone with two brain cells together could see his true loyalties, if they bothered to look closely enough.

Theodore was not ashamed to admit that he very much admired the man. Severus Snape was an embodiment of everything the house of Slytherin had always stood for and his personal hero and role
model at that.

The last couple of days were the most surreal in Harry’s life and between basilisks and blast-ended skrewts that was actually saying something. So, either he had gone mad or aunt Petunia had, which was more likely. However, after thinking about it he came to the conclusion that she must have taken it very personally being used as means to an end by a wizard. The result was most astounding. She obviously had taken it upon herself to correct the abuse of fifteen years in three short weeks.

Harry hiccupped and took a deep breath adjusting himself in his chair. The second helping of the pudding had been definitely too much. He looked over to the bowl of chips and bottle of coke sitting on the corner of his desk with a face of great suffering. If this goes on like that he would be twice his size by the end of month. Though considering what he had encountered looking himself over in a full body mirror after his morning shower, it might not be such a bad thing, he might even start looking normal then.

Fact still remained that he was a growing boy and the stress of the last school year had done him no favours. Hogwarts fare or not, his eating habits had not been his first priority, and unlike Neville, not having any reserves to fall back upon in the first place, his mirror image looked accordingly. Neville looked great right now he had noticed, whereas he himself resembled a death camp survivor more than anything else. Add to it that hair and those glasses and the overall picture was as far from appealing as imaginable. He should be thankful for his oversized clothes he supposed, or people would have noticed.

This would not do! Apart from being unhealthy, great leaders in the making simply could not afford to look like that. People followed strength, charisma, beauty and sex appeal as well as money and power, and if he was honest with himself, at this very moment he had nothing of them. He looked over to the treats with new determination, before shaking his head. If he got even one more bite into him, he would be sick.

Sighing he took out his to-do list to add improve physical condition and with a lot teeth gritting submit to a makeover by Hermione and Ginny. Oh, Merlin and holy Gods, he’d rather face that bloody dragon again! Scratching out the point about his parents’ wills he folded it and put it away as quickly as possible, as if unable to look at the last entry any longer.

He supposed he would need to start working out as soon as he had gained some weight. Were there any potions to help him to get into shape faster? He took a fresh piece of parchment to ask Hermione exactly that.

Mr. Garner arrived at ten the following morning, turning out to be a middle-aged, tall and haggard gentleman with sharp eyes and face hewn in stone. Harry liked him immediately, showing him to the sitting room and going to the kitchen to bring tea. Aunt Petunia decided to do some shopping for the next couple of hours, seeming to prefer to leave two wizards in her house alone to staying with two wizards in the same house. Harry would not have cared either way to be honest.

The pleasantries out of the way Mr. Garner got down to business. “Mr. Potter, I must admit your request took me by surprise.”

“Why?” Harry smirked tilting his head with an amused glint in his eye. “Are you too suffering under the misconception that my reputation were public property, for them to do with it as they please?”
Mr. Garner startled at this Harry could tell.

“Or is it because the Boy-Who-Lived is expected to be so universally magnanimous that he’d give and forgive anything to anyone at any time?”

He took a sip of his tea watching the man give him a once over, seemingly reassessing his first impression. Good!

He put his cup down on the table, crossed his legs and put his folded hands on them while leaning forward slightly.

“Let’s talk plainly, Mr. Garner,” he looked the man directly in the eyes. “I’m not your Golden Boy, nor your almighty hero, and I most certainly have no intentions to become a martyr. I am however undeniably Harry James Potter, Heir of House Potter and Black, and my person and anything else of mine are my alone to rule and manage as I see fit.”

He leaned back into his chair taking up his cup again. He really liked the wording of that one!

“I have requested your assistance not because I’m in need of that money, but because I wish to make a statement, and not only to the Daily Prophet, but to anyone who is clever enough to get it.” The expression on his face turned rather ugly forcing Mr. Garner to suppress a shudder. “Namely, don’t fuck with me!”

He took another sip regarding the man before him calmly.

“Can you make this happen?”

“I can, Mr. Potter.”

A Bad End

One night in late July Draco finished the last of his ablutions in quite a good mood and proceeded to his bedchamber. He had chosen an engagement ring out of the available assortment of Malfoy family jewellery today, telling his mother that he wanted to have it on him when returning to Hogwarts, since his birthday would be during term.

He smirked remembering her gushing about Pansy being delighted at his good taste. Well, sure she would be. If she ever got her hands on it, that is. He climbed under the covers and doused the lights with a word of command.

He sincerely hoped his taste would not fail him in choosing a future wife as well, fact remained though that he still wanked several times a day thinking of Ginny Weasley. He had tried imagining it with other girls, even red-haired ones, but failed miserably. Maybe actually having sex with a couple of others would get her out of his system? Drifting slowly into sleep he decided it would do no harm to try.

It seemed like he had closed his eyes only a moment ago when he was roused unpleasantly by a high-pitched voice.

“Young Master, sir, young Master, sir!” A house-elf was tugging at his covers.

“What?” he snarled at it annoyed.

The creature jumped and stumbled backwards bowing so low, its ears brushed the rug.

“Young Master, sir, Master sends Roocky to fetch you, sir. He is wanting you to get ready and greet the great guests, sir.” It seemed to tremble violently from head to toe.

Blinking sleepily Draco realised that it must be somewhere in the early hours of the morning already. “Right,” he yawned. “I’ll be down soon.”

The house-elf disappeared with a pop leaving him to get out of bed grumbling. He froze in mid-movement when his brain had finally processed what the creature had said and sat back down wide awake now, cold dread sizing his insides.

Well, he should have expected this sooner rather than later he supposed taking slow deep breaths, calming himself just like Severus had taught him. If he wanted to get out of this alive, he should prepare himself thoroughly.

He applied just a touch of Occlumency shields, putting everything incriminating and offensive behind them and filled the forefront of his mind with thoughts and memories becoming to a son of a high-ranking Death Eater. Freshening up a bit he put on a set of black formal robes and ventured out to meet his father and the Dark Lord, deciding to let fear blend in with his thoughts. It was something he most certainly would not have to conjure up after all.

xxxoooxxx

Hermione put the last of her books into her trunk and closed the lid blowing a curl of hair out of her face. Tomorrow on Harry’s birthday she would travel to London to spend the rest of the summer with her friends.

To say her parents had not been pleased would be an understatement. As a matter of fact, they had
quite a few rows in the last couple of weeks about her going back to Hogwarts. Her parents considered it no longer safe enough, ever since they had been informed about her injury, but she was able to convince them that it was no longer safe enough to go down the street minding one’s own business and at school she would be safer than anywhere else.

Well, it was true at least, she sighed getting up and grabbing her shorts and nighty, giving Crookshanks a scratch behind his ears on the way to the bathroom. The paper this morning had proclaimed in panic that the Dementors were no longer under Ministry control and had left Azkaban together with every single one of the incarcerated Death Eaters. The other prisoners had been simply Kissed and left behind.

She had been expecting this event for a while, but was still shocked to see all the grim and malicious faces sneering up at her from the many pages. Nothing for it though, she only hoped her parents would be alright in her absence.

xxxooooxxx

Hermione shot up in her bed late at night, jolted by what seemed like pandemonium breaking loose in the middle of her room. Crookshanks’ yowling, hissing and spiting filled the air mingled with screams of pain, cursing and shouts of surprise, while flickering wandlight illuminated three bulky wizards and her cat attached to the face of one of them, making short process with it by generous application of claws.

Shaking off her stupor she made a dive for her wand on the side table, only to be thrown against the wall by a mild blasting curse, which nonetheless seemed to have knocked all air out of her. Her wand was summoned away and right into the hand of Thorfinn Rowle. She recognised him from the photograph she had seen only this morning. The second one, Dolohov, leered at her uglily. Looking down she noticed that her shirt had ridden all the way up, exposing her breasts. She pushed it back down with a gasp and folded her arms around herself protectively, which did not stop him from grabbing at them, withdrawing his hand quickly however, shaking it and howling as if burned.

“Bloody virgins!” he cursed and whacked Rowle on the head for laughing at him.

In the meanwhile, the third Death Eater, who turned out to be Macnair, had managed to grab Crookshanks around his neck and pull him off.

“YOU FUKING BEAST!” he screamed enraged and pointed his wand at him, casting a Cutting Curse so strong that it cut the cat literally in two.

“Nooooo!” Hermione threw herself towards him, but was intercepted by Dolohov, who grabbed her by the hair and started dragging her out of her room and down the stairs into the sitting-room, ignoring her frantic clawing at his hand.

It hurt so much! Not only the pulling on her hair, but also the blunt edges of the steps digging into her whole body, not giving her even a moment to collect herself until she was tossed roughly on the floor before the lounge, avoiding hitting her head on the small table standing in front of it only by inches. She raised her head slowly and was shocked to see her parents huddled together not far from her watched by Nott senior and Mulciber, who were laughing and jeering at Macnair’s scratched face.

Before she could make a move towards them she was hit with a Full Body-Bind and dragged back a bit.

“Well, mudblood,” Nott drawled, “you might be pleased to know that our Lord has decided to grace
you with his attention, allowing you the privilege of serving as means of causing great pain to the renowned saviour of the wizarding world.”

The others snickered maliciously.

“Unfortunately, he ordered for you to be brought before him whole and alive,” he pulled a face of regret, before grinning gleefully. “However, it does not extend to these filthy muggles here.”

Hermione could only watch in silent horror as her parents were hit with Crucio after Crucio, their bodies bending and convulsing accompanied by screams of pain and jeers of the Death Eaters, begging in her mind Merlin, God, anyone for them to stop. After that they proceeded with Bone Breakers and Cutting Curses mangling them beyond recognition. So much blood! She could have never imagined a human body held so much blood!

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the Avada Kedavra was cast. She was released from the binding curse and dragged up and away having neither strength nor presence of mind left to fight.

xxxooooxxx

“Young Master, sir, young Master, sir!”

Theodore was up and awake the moment he heard Missy’s voice. “Yes.”

“Master and his friends have entered the grounds through the gates, sir.”

He could not help the grin of happy anticipation spreading on his face. “Very well, you have your instructions.”

The elf nodded frantically, its ears flapping and disappeared with a pop.

Getting out of bed and dressing with fast precision Theodore cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, along with the Step-Silencing Charm and crept outside towards the stairs to have a good view of the main entrance when the group arrived. And there they were! His father entered first followed by Mulciber and for some reason a very scratched and still bleeding Macnair, then Rowle and Dolohov, and between them...

His heart skipped a beat and started back in double, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead when he recognised her.

No! No! No! No! No! Please, Merlin, no!

“Missy!” His father bellowed removing his cloak and outer robe, hanging them on the hooks of the wardrobe.

The head-elf appeared immediately bowing to the ground. “Yes, Master.”

“Food and drink to the grand salon as soon as possible. Bring refreshments in the meanwhile,” he instructed briefly not even looking at her. She bowed and disappeared.

“Where is your son?” Mulciber asked undressing as well.


At the mentioning of him Hermione raised her head and looked around frantically. She seemed uninjured as far as he could tell, which brought him some relief. His father grabbed her roughly,
making Theodore grit his teeth in anger and started towards the dungeon entrance.

“Make yourself comfortable while I take care of our guest,” he called over his shoulder.

The others chuckled and went through the doors on the right.

Huddled against the railing on the second floor Theodore took several deep breaths to suppress his rising panic. No need losing one’s head yet! She was still alive and mostly unharmed, meaning the Dark Lord had plans for her and nothing was going to happen to her in the next couple of hours.

He watched his father reappear at the door leading to the dungeon staircase, cross the hall and follow his fellow Death Eaters into the west wing.

*Twist a bad situation to your advantage! Use your enemies’ overconfidence to deliver a deadly blow!*

A smile full of malicious glee spread across his face.

*Now, what will His Lordship do when he learns that their pray has slipped away under their very noses, hm?*

Checking that the charms were still in place he descended to the first floor, keeping an eye on the west wing entrance at all times. The small door leading to the kitchens was hidden behind a tapestry to his left. Carefully, he peeled it away and slipped inside.

The house-elves greeted him happily as always and directed him towards the food and drink ready for delivery. Taking the vials of potion out of his inner pockets he distributed it generously over everything, congratulating himself yet again on his resourcefulness. Had it been a true poison the house-elves would have recognised it and prevented him from doing this, though he could tell they knew what it was meant for anyway.

Sitting down to wait for the next round Theodore contemplated his next course of action. He needed to get Hermione out of here in a way that would not leave any traces leading to him or the manor in general. He had to convince her to keep the details of her escape to herself and let him handle her tormentors his way.

He sighed running his hand through his hair, sincerely doubting it would be a piece of cake. Yet he had to try nonetheless, because the only other alternative would be obliviating her, and that was something he was most certainly not going to do.

After making sure every bit of food and drink going up was laced thoroughly he reapplied the charms and returned to the entrance hall. He needed Hermione’s wand and suspected it was in one of the pockets of the Death Eater robes hanging in the wardrobe. Sure enough there it was, a thin piece of vine wood sticking out of Rowle’s robe. He would have recognised it anywhere.

He approached the massive door leading to the dungeons and turned the doorknob carefully. It clicked and opened to his utter amazement. Merlin, such arrogance! His father did not even bother to lock it! Shutting it behind him he crept down the torch lit staircase, shuddering slightly in the cold air.

Hearing her cry further down the corridor, his heart constricted in his chest. How much he would have given to spare her all of this! Following the sound he reached the last holding cell and peered inside. Hermione was sitting on the floor, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth with her face pressed firmly into them. Unable to bear her suffering any longer he stepped back and cast *Alohomora* on the lock, swinging the heavy wooden door wide open.
Her head shot up and she blinked in confusion reminding him suddenly that he was still invisible. He took the charms off prepared to face the worst possible reaction, but before he could even open his mouth to offer some sort of explanation, she leaped up and stormed towards him, knocking him on his arse. A moment later he found himself with a lapful of barely clad witch clinging to him with all her might and sobbing hysterically into his shoulder.

To say he was shocked would be a crude understatement. For several moments he just sat there and stared in disbelief, before putting his arms around her tentatively. She did not reprimand him, so he tightened his hold and buried his face in her hair, finding his heart somewhere up his throat.

This must be a dream! It must be, since he could not find any other explanation. How often had he dreamt of holding her in his arms? And now she was, his angel hurt and upset, but still in his arms. He began rocking them, rubbing circles on her back and murmuring nonsense in her ear to calm her down.

A good while later the sobs slowed down to hiccups and ceased entirely, leaving them sitting in silence, until Hermione sighed heavily and lifted her head. She looked horrible, her hair a complete mess and eyes red and puffy, yet hard and burning with determination and a sinister something he had never seen in them before.

Unable to control himself he felt his breathing quicken and his cock swell under the fiery gaze holding his own captive. So beautiful in her wrath! My goddess! I am forever your humble servant!

“I know the roses were from you,” she told him, her voice somewhat hoarse. “And I know why you gave them to me.”

Undiluted hatred twisted her entire face into an ugly mask.

“THEY KILLED MY PARENTS!” she screamed enraged. “TORTURED THEM BEFORE MY VERY EYES AND KILLED THEM! AND CROOKSHANKS!”

She took several deep breaths gathering herself again, then took his face into both of her hands, gripping it almost painfully.

“Swear to me they won’t survive this very day and I’ll give you EVERYTHING!”

“I swear,” he uttered breathily, unable to believe his luck. “I swear, my love! Anything for you!”

She nodded in acceptance and released his face to wrap her arms around him, pressing her cheek to his. He was breathing heavily, trying to gather his wits again, then realised that they better get moving or they would get caught and very reluctantly let go of her.

“Hermione, my love, listen to me carefully,” he brushed the remnants of her tears away with his fingertips. “We’ll ascend to the entrance hall where you are going to use the Floo to escape. Go to the Leaky Cauldron. Tom will be able to protect you until the Aurors arrive. The Floo is warded, so they won’t be able to trace it back. Don’t tell them where you have been or that someone helped you, alright?”

She nodded in understanding.

“Good. Now, let’s go.”

Hermione slid out of his lap allowing him to rise and help her up, before leading the way up the stairs. He gave her wand to her and reapplied the charms on himself with his own, telling her to wait here for a moment. The hall was empty, so he cast a Silencing Charm on the fireplace for good
measure and beckoned her to come over, showing her the pot with the Floo Powder on the mantelpiece.

Sighing with relief the moment the flames turned to normal he eradicated all traces of his magic and made sure the door to the dungeons stood wide open, before making his way back to his rooms. The morning was an hour away at most and the Dark Lord should arrive any moment now. He called Missy to get the confirmation that all the compromised food and drink had been replaced and disposed of already, then decided to take a nice long bath, basking in the knowledge that everything he had dreamt of was about to come true very soon.

xxx000xxx

Hermione sat wrapped into blankets in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement drinking her fifth cup of hot cocoa and watched Aurors and other officers bustle around busily. It was obvious that her home was not the only one attacked last night, though she seemed to be the only one who had not only survived, but managed to escape relatively unscathed. And though the memories of her parents’ torture and death fluttered before her eyes every time she closed them, she could not help consider herself lucky.

She had narrated the events of the last night in detail, leaving Theodore and Nott manor out, telling them she had managed to snag her wand back from Rowle while they weren’t looking and hide it in her underwear, using it to open the cell door and escape an unknown location. The last spell on her wand had been indeed Alohomora, so no one came asking a second time, only congratulating her on good and timely thinking.

It was strange she mused that she actually had no fears for her future this very moment. Yes, she was an orphan now and still underage, on the other hand she also knew that she wasn’t alone.

She looked up and saw Tonks make her way towards her.

“Believe it or not, but the bodies of all five of the Death Eaters who had attacked you last night had been found lying in the trash behind Obscurious’ in Knockturn Alley half an hour ago.”

Hermione smiled grimly. “Good.” He had kept his word, not like she had thought even for a moment that he wouldn’t.

Tonks blinked at her with her eyebrows in the pink hairline.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she shot back annoyed. “I’ve just been spared the trouble of going after them myself.”

Tonks nodded in understanding. “The whole business is quite fishy though, if you ask me. Everything indicates that they had a heart failure after being subjected to Cruciatius. Obviously, You-Know-Who had punished them for your escape, but I don’t think he had meant to actually kill them, nor is heart failure one of the effects of Cruciatius, especially in all five cases.” She sighed rubbing the back of her neck tiredly. “Unfortunately, no one could spare the time to look into it right now, or even want to for that matter.”

*Unfortunately indeed,* Hermione could only smirk inside.

No, Hermione Granger had absolutely no fears for her future knowing without doubt where she belonged. To Harry in friendship and to Theo in love.
**Between Friends and Foes**

_Something must have happened!_

Harry could feel it in his guts pacing restlessly in his room. Dumbledore was never late unless there was an absolute emergency and with yesterday’s paper in mind he could guess that no good news was to be expected.

And here he had thought today was going to be great. Well, it had started quite promising at least. Aunt Petunia had made him a cake and given him an unbelievably thoughtful gift, an assortment of his mother’s old childhood belongings and pictures. That she still had them after all this time was mind-boggling enough, but she had actually taken her time and explained who and what the pictures had shown. Many had his grandparents in them, so he took the opportunity and asked her after them.

It turned out that he might not have been named after his father’s father after all, as their names were Henry and Violet Evans. Which grandfather he had been named after he supposed was something he would never know now.

The doorbell rang making him stumble over his own feet in haste to get it. He wrenched the door open with the first question on the tip of his tongue, only to come face to face with none other than Severus Snape in all his dark glory, countenance included. Now he knew without doubt that whatever it was, it must be really bad.

“Where is Dumbledore?” he asked stepping back to let him in.

“The Headmaster is a far too busy man to waste his time on fetching conceited brats, Potter,” Snape sneered glaring down his nose at him. “Now get your things and let’s go. I don’t have all day.”

Knowing he wouldn’t get any specific information out of him Harry ran up the stairs to get his trunk and Hedwig’s cage. Whatever questions he had could wait until he got to Grimmauld Place.

xxxooxxx

Snape had apparered them directly to the porch, then opened the door and ushered him inside. Remembering to be quiet in the entrance hall Harry proceeded directly to the kitchen, while Snape enlarged his belongings and left them next to the staircase, before following him.

Only Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Ginny were inside, greeting him and wishing him a Happy Birthday. He though had more urgent things on his mind.

“What happened?” he asked not even bothering with pleasantries.

“Attacks all over Britain last night,” Ron supplied immediately. “Mostly homes of the muggleborn and mixed families.”

“Hermione?” his heart was ready to break out of his ribcage.

“Unfortunately yes, dear,” Mrs. Weasley confirmed. “But thank Merlin she managed to escape,” she continued quickly seeing his face. “She is resting now in the girl’s usual room, so how about you sit down and calm yourself. I’ll make you a cup of tea and Professor?”

Snape nodded taking a seat as far away from them as possible.
“Her parents had been tortured and killed before her very eyes, Crookshanks too,” Ginny informed him. “It was Mulciber, Dolohov, Nott, Macnair and Rowle, they took her away to some manor dungeon, but Hermione being Hermione managed to steal her wand back and simply unlocked the door and got out of there through the Floo.”

Harry nodded his heart bleeding for his friend.

“But we don’t need to worry about the sorry bastards anymore,” Ron put in with his mouth full of something already. “They’ve been killed by You-Know-Who a couple of hours later.”

Harry blinked at that and furrowed his brows. “He had actually killed them for something so trivial? Weren’t they Inner Circle members?”

Ron shrugged in response.

“We don’t know the details, but it seems like they have been tortured with Cruciatas until they had a heart failure,” Ginny said.

“All five of them?”

“Yeah,” she nodded taking a biscuit herself.

Harry processed it in silence. No way could this be just a coincidence and he had an inkling that Hermione might know more than she had revealed so far. He would talk to her later in private. He looked up and over to Snape, meeting his gaze and throwing up his shields automatically, guessing that this was someone who might know more than he let on as well.

xxxooooxxx

My, Potter, you have grown up at last!

Severus could not help admitting, while sipping his tea that the mutt’s death had obviously had a positive effect on the boy.

How fitting that the dog has made himself more useful in death than in life.

He watched the gossiping teenagers comparing them again. Yes, definitely an improvement. He was surprised to see the brat actually not swagger around like the place belonged to him. Well, it did belong to him, hadn’t he realised that?

Anyway, Potter was not the only brat, who he had been very pleased to see a positive development in. Nott’s nerve still staggered him. Not in a hundred years would he have believed him capable of something like that, and yet...

The look on the Dark Lord’s face when he realised they were dead had been absolutely priceless! More so, because there was no explanation for it at all, beyond the obvious of course. The remnants of food and drink littering the room had not revealed anything, neither had the bodies themselves. He was able to tell that there must have been some sort of poison at work only minutes ago, but had not said anything.

Theodore Nott had been dragged before the Dark Lord dripping wet and barely clad, apparently just out of the bathroom, and delivered the most pathetic display of a snivelling, spineless creature he had ever seen. Being acquainted with Wormtail, it was actually saying something. It had looked like he hadn’t even known that his father was in the house last night, much less anyone else.
Enraged the Dark Lord told Severus to take samples of their body fluids and find out what the hell had killed them, before turning on his heel and storming out with the rest of the Inner Circle behind him. And he had been quite at his wit’s end as to the culprit, until he turned around and was met with the sight of Nott standing proud and upright, an amused glint in his eye and a smug smirk plastered on his face.

*Clever sneaky little shit.*

He could not help feeling proud of the boy. ‘You are playing dangerous games, Mr. Nott,’ he had said to him then, only to watch the smirk go wider. ‘But they pay, sir,’ had been his reply and Severus could only silently agree with him.

Taking another sip he watched Potter rise and excuse himself to take his things up to his and Weasley’s room. A moment later there was a sound of something crashing down in the hall and Mrs. Black’s screeching filled the air, together with the howling of the other portraits. He stood up and leisurely walked to the kitchen entrance to have a look.

Weasley was helping Potter up, who had obviously tripped over his own trunk and sent the cage standing on top of it flying across the hall, while Ms. and Mrs. Weasley were struggling to shut the curtains.

“Filthy blood traitors, get out of my house! You disgusting creatures...”

“SHUT UP, YOU VILE BITCH!”

Severus blinked and stared at Potter mildly shocked, as was everyone else in the room, including Mrs. Black.

“Who are you to order me around, you nasty little thing? Get out! You are defiling the house of my ancestors!”

“As the Master of this house I order you to shut up or bear the consequences of my wrath,” Potter answered dangerously calm.

“You! The traitor’s son! Get out, filth! This house will never be yours! Get out...”

Potter raised his wand. “Incendio!”

A constant stream of flames shot towards the portrait, which screamed as if in pain, consuming the canvas and leaving only a blackened frame behind. For a moment there was nothing but shocked silence, until suddenly the frame detached itself from the wall and fell down, breaking in several places.

“Oh, look! The Sticking Charm was obviously not that permanent after all,” Potter commented drolly, before turning towards the other portraits, which recoiled in fear. “Is anyone else here questioning my legacy?”

They all shook their heads vehemently.

“Good,” Potter collected his cage and started up the stairs, levitating his trunk before him. The Weasley children followed him a moment later, clearly impressed.

Severus shook off his surprise and returned to his tea not wanting to admit that he was impressed as well. And with Mrs. Weasly still in shock no one pointed out that Potter had performed illegal underage magic twice before their very eyes.
Well, unfortunately, no one could forbid the brat doing magic in his own well warded, undetectable house. Demonstrably, Potter was well aware of the fact.

*Oh, to be the fly on the wall when Dumbledore finds out!*

xxxxooxxxx

Draco Malfoy was completely and utterly disgusted and the only thing keeping him from showing it, was the threat of pain and subsequent death. Fortunately, due to his mother’s careful manoeuvring, he had to spend as little time in the presence of their ‘guests’ as possible.

*Is this thing supposed to be the great Dark Lord? The revered messiah and reformer of the wizarding world?*

To be honest, Draco had his doubts IT was alive, much less human, and attributing to IT any sort of purity, blood or otherwise, was a travesty in and of itself. He had always wondered why Potter had no respect for the Dark Lord, even after coming face to face with him more than once. Now he knew, having none himself, even though he was still afraid of saying his name.

What revolted him the most were not the red eyes or the ghoul-like appearance, but watching his oh so proud relatives, aunt Bella and his father in the frontline, grovel at ITS feet like common slaves. No, that would be too kind; like a bunch of lapdogs, who wriggled their tails at every pat and small bone coming their way and slinked off with tails between their legs beaten and crucioed, whenever their Master was displeased.

Was this the great future of the wizarding society his father had been raving about whenever he got the chance in the past? And he was actually expected to contribute to it with everything he had? Fuck them! He’d rather end up knutless on the streets! Not that it would ever come to that with his father outlawed and on the run, but still. No wonder Severus had changed sides. ANYTHING was preferable to this, even serving Dumbledore.

Draco sat in his chair silently willing the last month of summer to flow by faster. He had things to do.

xxxxooxxxx

It was only two days later that Harry got the chance to speak to Hermione alone and undisturbed. Ron and Ginny went to Diagon Alley to help out at the twins’ shop, since their assistant took ill, to earn themselves a bit of pocket money, and Mrs. Weasley was busy with lunch preparations expecting a lot of people today. The Order members were still cleaning up the aftermath of the attacks and were stopping by the Headquarters to eat, rest and report their progress.

He had cornered her in the library right after a late breakfast and set up every privacy ward in his repertoire, before sitting down in the chair next to her and pushing it around to face her. He raised an eyebrow in silent question and she sighed and closed her book putting it away, obviously having expected this for a while.

“They took me to Nott manor,” she conceded without beating around the bush. “After watching my parents tortured and killed I had no presence of mind to even take in my surroundings properly, much less plot an escape.”

Harry nodded putting his hand on her arm in comfort, waiting for her to continue on her own.

“Nott senior locked me in a dungeon holding cell and left me to my business. I don’t know how much time had passed, I’ve been sobbing my guts out when I heard someone cast Alohomora and the door opened. It was Theodore Nott.”
Suddenly, all the puzzle pieces fell together giving him a very clear picture of what had happened and why.

“Your boyfriend?” he asked cautiously.

Hermione looked up startled and blushed deeply, despite her apprehension. But seeing no negative reaction on his part, she nodded.

“He had freed you and helped you to escape, before making sure his own father and his friends did not get away alive?” Harry wanted to know.

“Yes,” she regarded him defiantly, as if waiting for the judgement.

He could only grin wickedly in response. “Then I’m alright with him.”

She let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding and glared at him half heartedly for leading her on, but then let it go, shaking her head in resignation.

“You really are alright with it?”

“Yes, unless he hurts you,” Harry assured her still smirking. “Then I’m going to chop his balls off and feed them to him raw.” His mirth disappeared though as quickly as it came. “Ron is going to go berserk.”

“Yes,” she sighed heavily. “I fear this one is going to be the last nail into the coffin of our friendship. He has been behaving these past days, though I’m not sure if it’s due to coming around or Mrs. Weasley.”

She looked down at her hands resting in her lap. “From what he has said to me recently, I’ve gotten the impression that he’s trying to win me over, using my supposed vulnerability at the moment.” She looked up again smiling weakly. “For someone, who hates anything even remotely Slytherin on sight, he’s using quite cunning tactics.”

“He has always been good in strategy,” Harry acknowledged hiding his disgust. “But you don’t seem to be any more accessible than last month.”

“I know it’s strange, but I don’t feel any pain anymore, only sadness and sometimes anger,” she confessed looking guilty. “I’m having nightmares at night and what has happened is constantly on my mind when I’m awake, but I’m not miserable.”

“Believe me, I know exactly how you feel,” Harry reassured her smiling sadly. “Ever since Sirius died I felt guilty about not pining after him, but one gets used to it in time.”

“I think it has something to do with the fact that my parents have been avenged already,” Hermione added thoughtfully, “and that I’m not alone. I still have you and Theodore and other friends, and just like you I now have a new goal in my life, even though it came with an awful price.”

Harry raised his eyebrow in question sincerely interested in her answer.

“Well,” she smirked mischievously, “next to helping you to fight and win a war and reform the wizarding world, to get into Theodore’s pants of course. It would be quite stupid of me to let my Prince Charming slip out of my grasp, wouldn’t it?”

They looked at each other with their faces straight only for a second, before breaking out in laughter. And despite everything Harry could only be happy for her.
Dumbledore read the last report and put it aside rubbing his tired eyes. A glance at the ornate clock hanging on his office wall revealed it to be two in the morning. He sighed and stood up slowly, trying not to aggravate the knots in his back too much. On days like that he truly felt his age and was not fond of it at all.

The fact remained though that this wave of violence had taken him by surprise. He had not expected it be so soon, nor that extensive. Severus had not been privy to it, which was nothing new to be honest, but neither had been any other of his informants. Six Death Eaters had been killed and three taken by the Aurors arriving on time in few isolated cases. Unfortunately, those were just small fish. The more disturbing had been the discovery of five high profile Death Eaters dead in Knockturn Alley.

The strange occurrence refused to leave his mind and understandably so, since no one seemed to have the slightest idea what had happened. It was out of question that Tom had killed them himself, not even unintentionally, seeing as Criciatus simply did not cause heart failure. Consequently, he was asking himself who and how?

Severus had assured him that the younger Nott had absolutely nothing to do with it, having neither brains nor guts enough for any such endeavour, and because the boy’s interrogation by Tom hadn’t produced any results Dumbledore was inclined to believe him. For a fleeting moment he had entertained the idea that Hermione Granger had something to do with it, but had discarded it as quickly. For all her brightness it was highly doubtful the girl had been capable of doing anything beyond getting herself to safety at the time. That she had managed even that much was a small miracle already, no need adding to it.

And on top of it, Harry’s behaviour had truly started to bother him. Not only did he seem to be far more informed than Dumbledore had designated, he had become almost rebellious. After the incident with the portrait he had given the boy a stern talking to about using magic out of school, only to get an angry retort of it being none of his business what he did or didn’t do in his own house, and the Ministry wouldn’t know anyway. Telling him it was against law, not to mention school rules, brought on a fit of temper and the suggestion that Dumbledore should enforce it on every single pureblood first before coming to him, and that this law was only a further act of discrimination of the muggleborn, which he was not going to tolerate under his roof.

He had given Ms. Granger and the Weasley children explicit permission to use magic while Mrs. Weasley wasn’t watching, as a result Molly had taken Ronald’s and Ginevra’s wands away, only giving them back whenever they had to leave the house. Unfortunately, she had no right to do the same with Harry, and while Ms. Granger was reasonable enough to be trusted not to abuse this privilege, he wouldn’t put it past the boy at this point.

He ascended the spiral staircase to his private quarters and headed towards the bathroom. What he needed to do was to find out how much the boy truly knew about his assets and political and social standing, and in such a way that wouldn’t cause awkward questions and possibly reveal something Harry wasn’t aware of yet. He would definitely talk to Remus, and maybe Ronald as well, before approaching Harry himself. Then, he would decide how to proceed.
The Master of the House

At breakfast the next morning their Hogwarts letters finally arrived, or rather McGonagall had brought them with her, telling them that she had kept them to deliver in person instead of sending them via owl. The envelopes were much thicker than usual containing their O.W.L. results.

“You can tell me directly which N.E.W.T. classes you wish to take as well,” she informed them taking a list out of her pocket.

Hermione immediately took them all, while Ron opted for a bare minimum of five, Transfiguration, Charms, Defence, Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures.

“Mr. Potter?” McGonagall turned to him expectantly. Harry however was busy examining a shiny badge that had fallen out of his envelope.

“You made me Quidditch captain?” he raised his head looking at her in disbelief.

“Yes, Mr. Potter,” she pursed her lips wryly, “the lifelong ban issued by Ms. Umbridge has been lifted, in case you were not informed.”

“I’m sorry, Professor, but I can’t accept it,” he pushed the badge across the table towards her. “I’m not going to play this year, or the next for that matter.”

Hermione smiled at him proudly while McGonagall, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley stared in shock. Ron nearly spit out a mouthful of pumpkin juice he had been drinking in that moment.

“Harry, mate;” he spluttered incredulously, “have you gone mad? You can’t leave us hanging!”

“You managed just fine without me last year, Ron,” Harry pointed out annoyed. “I’m not going to have time for it in the future, that’s all.”

He turned back to McGonagall. “Why didn’t Ron get it by the way? He’s far better in rules and tactics than I.”

Gathering herself she cleared her throat distractedly, before giving Ron a stern look. “Mr. Weasley is holding a prefect position already and his grades indicated that he wouldn’t be able to keep up with everything should other duties be added to it.”

“Does that mean that I can have it, if I give up my prefect duties?” Ron had jumped on it immediately looking very eager.

“Ronald Weasley!” Mrs. Weasley exploded at him.

“What?” he returned defiantly. “I’m not going to make it Head Boy anyway, so what’s the use in keeping it up?”

McGonagall regarded him thoughtfully. “If Mr. Potter takes them on in your stead, I don’t see why not.”

Harry blinked surprised. On second thought, it would be absolutely perfect considering the liberties he would gain, not to mention forward his own plans quite nicely.

“I’ll do it,” he said laughing at Ron, who was jumping up and down in his seat, looking like Christmas came early.
“Very well,” McGonagall made a note on her parchment.

Ron shoved the prefect badge into Harry’s hand and accepted the captain’s one in return caressing it reverently with a dreamy smile on his face, not caring in the least that the rest of them was shaking their heads at him in amusement.

“Now, to your schedule, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall went back to business.

“Er,” Harry took a look at his grades again, “I’ll take Defence, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures and third-year Ancient Runes.”

Ron choked on his toast coughing violently while McGonagall raised her eyebrow, but put it down without comment.

“No Potions?”

“I’ve gotten only an E in it, Professor.”

“Professor Snape is teaching Defence this year, Mr. Potter,” she informed him with a slight crease between her brows. “Professor Slughorn, who will take the Potions position, perfectly accepts students with an E grade in his class.”

They all stared at her not quite believing their ears.

**Now, that’s an interesting bit of news indeed!**

Harry’s mind went into overdrive calculating possible consequences. No wonder Snape was angry with Dumbledore. Who wouldn’t be?

He focused back on his Head of house smirking gleefully inside, while new possibilities unfolded themselves behind his eyes. “Then I’ll take Potions as well.”

xxxooooxxx

Theodore sat in his late father’s study surrounded by wadded pieces of parchment chewing on the tip of his quill. Writing to the object of his desire had turned out a harder task than he had originally imagined. Frustrated he threw the at this point quite abused quill on the desk and leaned back in his chair crossing his arms.

For crying out loud, just inquire after her health, it shouldn’t be this difficult!

But it was! There were so many things he had always wanted to tell her, so many questions he wanted to ask, but never dared to before believing it to be unwelcome. Now, he simply didn’t know where to start.

At least everything else was going perfectly as planned. The Aurors seemed to have finished their snooping, finally allowing him to take full control of the wards, or as full as it could possibly be with him still underage. He promptly erased every single magical signature keyed into them by his father. From this moment on no one not of Nott blood would be able to enter the property without his permission.

He sighed and took up his quill again. If only everything in life was that easy.

xxxooooxxx

Harry lay on the floor in Sirius’ old room breathing heavily and glaring at the ceiling, defeated. His
body was so useless and weak to the point where the handful of press-ups and body-lifts he had attempted today had drained him of all energy. Quidditch simply didn’t build up any muscle, not in the Seeker position at least. Consequently, the only part of him that was reasonably fit were his legs from the many staircases at Hogwarts, not to mention running for his life on regular basis.

Too bad there wasn’t a potion or charm to fix this easily. He would have to do it the hard way. And even though Hermione had promised him to brew the necessary supplement potions, she had warned him not to put much hope into them. The Growth Potion in particular would not give him more than an inch or two extra height. But being as short as he still was, Harry would be grateful for anything.

Giving up for today he cast a Freshening Charm and left to continue the exploration of the house, sighing when he remembered the events of this morning. He had finally managed to stomp down his pride enough to ask the girls for a makeover. Their squeals of delight nearly made him regret it and all things considered he still might. Greatly. He had given Hermione his Gringotts key and after taking his measurements they set off shopping. Thank Merlin he himself wasn’t allowed out without escort.

Unpleasant things aside, he decided it was a good feeling to wander around wherever he wanted with the absolute knowledge that nothing inside of these walls, apart from the habitants themselves, could harm him in any way. The house had a dark feel to it still, but the maliciousness behind it had disappeared entirely to be replaced by a tentative curiosity, or so it seemed. Harry was still getting used to the awareness of the building as an entity and was seriously asking himself, if he had taken control of the wards without conscious thought.

The library would have a book or two on the topic I’m sure, he smiled imagining Ron’s face should he ever say this aloud for him to hear.

He walked past the kitchen stopping for a moment to listen to Mrs. Weasley bustling around inside, before beginning his search for the dungeon entrance. Hermione had left him with the task of finding an appropriate place to brew and he figured, if this house had a potions lab, this would be the likeliest place for it. Not finding it immediately he pulled out his wand and cast a Revealing Charm. A rectangular shaped wall segment next to the staircase lit up light blue indicating a simple Concealment Charm to his relief. Curse breaking would take its time and he’d rather not alert anyone to his intentions yet.

“Potter!”

Harry jumped and whirled around wand at the ready, heart pounding wildly in his chest. He hadn’t seen anyone in the entrance hall just a moment before.

“What are you up to now?” Snape’s tall figure loomed before him, sharp black eyes regarding him suspiciously.

Throwing up his Occlumency shields Harry lowered his wand, thinking quickly. Ever since McGonagall’s visit two days ago he had been wracking his brain for a possible way to approach the Potions Master inconspicuously. In the end he had decided a direct one would be the best, seeing as Snape would probably smell any attempt at subtle manipulation on his side ten miles against the wind. In this regard the opportunity unfolding itself before him was almost too good to be true. To gain his attention and engage him in a constructive conversation and maybe even an interesting enterprise, what better way to get him hooked?

“Just looking around, sir,” he tried for nonchalant not sure if he had succeeded though, before turning towards the hidden entrance and cancelling the charm, letting a massive, yet highly polished and intricately carved wooden door appear before them. Unlocking it with the key sticking in the
keyhole Harry pulled it wide open, wrinkling his nose at the whiff of stale air.

“Sirius obviously had no interest in cleaning out the cellar,” he flashed Snape a cheeky grin to make up for the nervous fluttering in his guts. “Wonder what’s down there?”

He sent out a Scout, a combination of Detection and Revealing Charms Aurors used before entering an unknown territory, well aware that it was quite an advanced bit of magic for someone of his age. The bird-shaped bundle of light returned reporting the presence of several Locking Charms and an array of cursed weapons, all in all far less harmful conditions than he had expected. Feeling Snape’s eyes boring into the back of his head Harry set foot on the stairs leading downwards. The torches sprang into life immediately illuminating his way, and he began descending unable to help holding his breath until he rather felt than heard Snape following him.

The underground portion of the property turned out to be very fascinating, if extremely dusty. It was divided into four sections; holding cells and a torture chamber to the right, an impressive wine cellar to the left, storage rooms straight ahead and yes, a potions lab and ingredients storage behind them.

Keeping Snape’s profile in the corner of his eye Harry could clearly see the man’s curious nature getting the better of him, even though he tried hard to hide it. Suppressing the urge to crow in triumph Harry rubbed his hands together in glee.

“How about a deal, sir?” he smirked turning to face the Potions Master. “You’ll help me cleaning and I’ll key you into the wards.”

Snape straightened raising his eyebrow. “Wards, Mr. Potter?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed airily. “The blood wards I’m going to place on the entrance in a minute or so.”

In the hindsight he should have expected it he supposed. The attack came lightning-fast and if Harry hadn’t had his Occumency shields up already, it would have cut though his mind like a knife through butter. A collision of minds didn’t feel much different from a collision of heads he decided, rubbing his forehead in a futile attempt to ease the phantom pain. Then, he tensed realising the consequences.

Straightening, he looked Snape in the eyes and did not like at all what he saw in them. He let his wand slip into his hand ready for anything. They stared at each other for a couple of moments very much aware that they were alone down here with what could possibly be a dangerous enemy.

*Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Do something, idiot!*

He’d rather avoid duelling Snape right now and could only hope Snape would as well.

“And if you keep this little incident to yourself,” he addressed him forcing the smirk back on his lips, “I’ll let you select a dozen bottles of wine from my cellar as well.”

Holding his breath Harry watched Snape regard him warily, black eyes glittering in the torch-light, truly seeing him for the first time and earnestly gauging his intentions.

Finally, after what had felt like eternity, “Any bottles, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nearly sighed with relief, but restrained himself smiling wider instead.

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“Any, sir,” he allowed knowing full well that some of them must cost a fortune each. Honestly, he didn’t care as long as no curses of harmful variety were exchanged between them, and if it placed him on Snape’s good side, so much the better.
“Very well,” Snape concluded their agreement and stepped aside. He had been blocking the exit to prevent his escape, Harry realised passing him on the way up.

*Never leaving anything to chance, are we?*

Harry smiled grimly inside. This was exactly what made Snape so proficient in everything he did. He could only hope to acquire a similar diligence one day. He didn’t like to have his back turned to the man either, but trust he expected, was something that needed to be earned and he would have to be the one to make the first step.

Back in the entrance hall he made sure they were alone and Mrs. Weasley still busy, before casting a Silencing Charm on the kitchen door and taking out the ritual knife he had found in a hidden compartment in Sirius’ former study. Somehow he had the feeling that the house itself had led him to it, just like the spyhole in the drawing room on second floor or the niche with some jewellery in the Master bedroom. If he had not known any better, he would have said that the house actually liked him.

He cut his left palm diagonally letting his blood drop on the threshold and began chanting in Latin. One of the books Neville had sent him contained very detailed descriptions as to how such things were done, and after taking his time to de facto memorise it from the first page to the last he had no fears of doing something wrong. Snape watched him like a hawk, but did not move even a muscle until the wards were in place and it was time for him to be keyed in.

He stepped forward and extended his left hand for him to cut. Harry took it in his own mapping out its texture and shape, committing them to memory almost without conscious thought, yet very much aware that this was the first time he had touched the Potions Master skin on skin. And while with others it was a trivial everyday occurrence, with Snape it seemed to possess a level of intimacy he had never experienced before.

Horrified, he felt his pulse quicken and his insides give a pleasant lurch that he was only too familiar with from his experiences with Cho.

*Holy Graces, this can’t be happening!*

Panicking he smashed down his feelings with all his might, praying to every deity alive that Snape had not seen the beginnings of a blush on his face. Getting himself back under control he cut Snape’s palm and proceeded with the ritual, as if nothing life-changing had happened. When everything was done he removed the Silencing Charm from the kitchen door and concealed the newfound dungeon entrance just in time for the first Order member to arrive for lunch.

The man stopped abruptly noticing them standing close together and looked from Harry to Snape in confusion, but was quickly sent on his way by Snape’s customary glare. More people arrived, thus they locked eyes silently agreeing to meet again in the dungeons after everyone had left, before Snape turned and disappeared into the kitchen with a billow in his robes. Harry, feeling a bit unsteady both physically and mentally, made his way to the bathroom on the first floor as fast as possible without actually running. Shutting and locking the door behind him, he leaned his back against it and let his shields down breathing heavily.

*Merlin’s balls, what’s wrong with me? This just can’t be! I can’t be attracted to him... I can’t... I’m not even gay!*

Well, he definitely couldn’t be sure of that, could he now? Fighting evil left and right, not to mention his thrice damned celebrity status, he simply hadn’t had time to explore his preferences properly, unlike most of his peers at this point.
And even if I am, he’s Snape for Merlin’s sake! It’s just wrong on so many levels!

Says who? Harry’s mind came to an abrupt halt distancing itself from the Gryffindor Golden Boy conditioning and reassessed the situation from a different perspective. His entire life he had been doing nothing, but fulfilling other people’s expectations. The Dursleys had always insisted that he was a good for nothing freak; the muggle neighbours and teachers at his primary school saw him as a trouble maker, if not outright criminal; in the eyes of the wizarding public he was The-Boy-Who-Lived and recently the Chosen One and the Saviour; his peers looked up to their Golden Hero; and for Dumbledore he was the perfect mascot of the Light.

He stepped towards the sink and looked himself over in the mirror seeing none of these things. He was Harry the brother and friend, as well as Harry James Potter the Heir of the House Potter and Black; he was indeed the Chosen One and had ambitions to become the Saviour, even though not the one they all did expect. He was himself.

There is nothing wrong with what I am! There is nothing wrong with what I feel! And if the world doesn’t like it, they all can go hang!

He washed up and went down to the kitchen to join the Order members for lunch, plans over plans forming in his mind.
Musings

What in the name of Merlin did I get myself into? Again.

Severus Snape, the resident Defence Against the Dark Arts Master, sat in his chair before an empty fireplace in his new quarters on the first floor, nursing a glass of an excellent wine and contemplating the drama that was his life. Two weeks had passed since his run in with Potter at Grimmauld Place and the complete shift in his perception of the boy. No, definitely a young man now, wasn’t he? A cunning, ruthless and powerful young man, an obviously dangerous combination in regards to his unbound recklessness, and yet, he had still allowed himself to be recruited. Yes, recruited, since it was exactly what Potter had done, no matter how clumsily.

He’s going to get better in time no doubt. How many does he have already?

Well, Lupin of course. One must be truly blind to not notice what had happened there, though everyone assumed that it had been unintentional on the boy’s side. Severus knew better now. And Granger as well, they considered themselves family as far as he could see, not to mention that she was the only other person Potter had keyed into his blood wards. Longbottom too most likely, he had seen enough of their interaction last term to have a good understanding of their relationship. The Weasley girl was possibly high on the list as well, if not in his ranks already, her youngest brother on the other hand seemed to be fortunately not even under consideration.

Not a bad haul for such a short time indeed.

Severus took another sip of his wine savouring its taste, such an exquisite drop was not something he could afford very often, or at all if he was honest with himself. Thus, the invitation to gorge himself on the Black family cellar had been certainly a very attractive bonus. More so, because he knew very well that Potter wouldn’t care a shit, if he took whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, as long as it was not too valuable and for his own use only, except for the specified dozen, which was a down payment for his services of sorts and now safely put away in his Gringotts vault. Not for long though, seeing as the goblin prince himself had made him an offer to take them off his hands for an adequate sum only two days after he had put them on the inventory register, and Severus had decided that he’d better take it.

That was actually one of the reasons changing sides had not been that hard a decision this time. Any payment, much less in advance, for his non-school related commitments was a fairly new concept to him, and one he could very much get used to he resolved. The teacher’s salary was not much, even with the Head of house bonus, and since his father had drunk away what was left of the Snape fortune long before Severus had turned of age, he would not have much to fall back upon when he left Hogwarts in a year’s time.

Secondly, it was quite refreshing that Potter, unlike the Dark Lord and even Dumbledore, did not consider himself a Master. This might change in time, though Severus sincerely doubted it would. The young man had always been rather a quid pro quo sort, fiercely loyal to those he considered his and quite ruthless towards his enemies, however not without mercy being still a Gryffindor. All in all, not the worst Master to pledge loyalty to considering that both his former ones had disappointed him greatly.

And thirdly, both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were old farts, whose power and glory were all but gone. Potter on the other hand was the future, a new Lord on the rise to greatness. Any Slytherin worth his name would prefer him to any of the others. He could steer his young snakes towards him far more successfully than towards Dumbledore any time of day, not to mention with a far lighter
Drinking up he looked over to the bottle standing out of reach with some longing, greatly missing the small table he had in his old living room. Too lazy to stand up he summoned it carefully, making sure the contents did not spill over.

Truth be told, he was bored out of his mind and had been ever since Slughorn had taken over his potion brewing duties for the hospital wing. Thinking ahead and not having any other place to put it, Severus had transferred his private laboratory to the cleaned out Grimmauld Place dungeon long before the old Potions Professor had the chance to get his pudgy fingers on it. Judging by the disappointment on his face, Slughorn had every ambition to appropriate it, obviously convinced that Severus would simply give it up being unable to use it anymore.

Taking another sip he leaned back, basking in the memory. No way in hell! He had invested years and countless Galleons into the finest equipment and ingredients available. Even though unable to brew regularly, it didn’t mean that he was no longer a Potions Master.

He could do some research now that he finally had time for it he supposed, or maybe brush up on his wandless fighting skills? Potter would certainly benefit from a bit of training as well, especially an excursion into the Dark Arts.

Yes, this would do nicely.

xxxoooxxx

Harry woke up and stretched languidly, before pulling his wand from under the pillow and casting Tempus. Nine thirty-two, a bit later than he was used to, due to reading late into the night. That book about curse detection he had stumbled upon in the library yesterday had been simply too mesmerizing to stop.

He sighed and moved to get up listening to Ron’s snores from the bed next to him. His newfound fascination for books and learning was doing nothing to relax their strained relationship, more so because he suspected Ron was jealous of all the time he was spending alone with Hermione. He had joined their library sessions two days ago, finally remembering that he still had all of his homework to do and only a week left until the start of term.

Harry slipped on a pair of yesterday’s socks and left for Sirius’ bedroom to do his morning exercises. He was getting slightly better he supposed, managing ten press-ups this time and moving on to the sit-ups and body-lifts. Finishing with a bit of stretching and aerobics he was quite ready for a shower.

Ron was still snoring when he returned wrapped in only a towel and started rummaging around his new wardrobe for a decent piece of boxers, cursing under his breath yet again. The girls had definitely had too much fun selecting his underwear. At least the rest of his clothes had turned out alright, or so he hoped, but judging from Mrs. Weasley’s and Tonks’ reaction he seemed to look good in them.

His physical condition had improved he could plainly see, though he was still far too scrawny for his tastes. The potions regiment he had started last week would hopefully help change that faster, and the Hair-Growth Potion would be ready tomorrow as well. They had discussed in great length what to do with his unruly mop and settled on letting it grow longer, so he could simply bind it back in a ponytail, seeing as cutting it would most likely have no effect at all. Unfortunately, his glasses would have to wait until the next Hogsmeade outing to be replaced.

Leaving Ron where he was Harry went down to the kitchen for a late breakfast. Mrs. Weasley was
astoundingly enough nowhere in sight, so he took eggs and bacon out of the cooling box and started on it the muggle way not knowing any cooking charms. Fifteen minutes later, he was contentedly munching away and pouring himself yet another cup of tea. Sipping it slowly he went over his plans for the last week of holidays.

This Sunday, the first of September, they would board the Hogwarts Express for their sixth year. Hermione had insisted he read the first five chapters of all his new school books and keep it ahead of the actual lessons from now on, to be able to concentrate on his extracurricular schedule without letting his school work suffer. It did make sense of course, but with all the interesting stuff in the Black family library it was very hard not to get sidetracked all the time.

*Just like yesterday*, he smiled into his cup and put it down in favour of more toast and eggs. Not to mention that he was not even close to being done with the house exploration.

*Among others*, he mused reminding himself to not forget to attend lunch today. Ever since the incident with Snape, he had taken to consciously monitoring his physical reactions towards different people, and the broad assortment of Order members offered a perfect study basis.

Three weeks of observation had revealed him to be sexually attracted to both men and women, but only a certain type. Tall, lean, dark-haired, pale and preferably dark-eyed, however he had also noticed that he liked the deep male voices more than the high female ones. According to that Cho Chang and Severus Snape were for him indeed the embodiment of physical perfection of their respective gender.

*Well, just figure my luck!* *My Mr. Perfect is far from perfect, but available at least.*

Or so he hoped. He did not know Snape’s preferences for sure, but distinctly remembered Sirius and Remus hinting in that direction more than once. That aside, a sexual relationship with a minor was worth a minimum of three and maximum of six months in Azkaban, if no coercion was involved, not to mention that non-platonic student/teacher relationships were prohibited according to the school bylaws. Harry would have to wait an entire year until he could even so much as consider a move on him. And that sucked!

Even if he might acquire a thing for Harry in time, Snape would never go against the rules and risking Azkaban would be far from his desires as well. Even with the Dementors gone, it was still a miserable place. The only other alternative would be an official engagement and Harry believed he was not yet desperate enough to even begin considering it.

Sighing he put the empty dishes away and ventured out in search of Hermione. They had planned to have a go on those storage rooms in the dungeon today. Who knew what they might dig out?

**xxxooxxx**

Ginny sat on her bed brushing her hair and watching Hermione write a letter again. The words seemed to flow freely from under her quill, no shyness or awkwardness at all.

*It must be to her boyfriend. Who else would she write to almost every day?*

It was also quite clear that Harry was on the secret already, seeing as he never even blinked when she asked to borrow Hedwig time and again. The two of them were closer than ever now, keeping their secrets between them and excluding everyone else. And Ginny couldn’t help feeling hurt.

Last year had been great! The fight against Umbridge and her lackeys, as well as You-Know-Who, had bound them together in friendship and unconditional trust, but all of that was nothing but
memory now. Sometimes she got the feeling an impenetrable wall had risen between them, growing higher every day.

She sighed and put her brush away. Whatever the reason, it had definitely something to do with Dumbledore and Ron and must be something really big. If she only knew what had happened!

_We are friends for Merlin’s sake, we are supposed to rely on each other! Where did it all go from one moment to another?_

Maybe it was still there, but they were too afraid to include her, not sure what her reaction would be? Ginny sincerely hoped so. In that case she would have to be the one to make the first step. They weren’t the only ones with embarrassing and potentially dangerous secrets around here after all.

Hermione had finished her letter and rolled it up sealing and charming it heavily, before putting it away in the drawer.

“No trust in my discretion?” Ginny asked amused by the level of security applied to a simple love letter.

Hermione turned to her smiling coyly. “Yours maybe, but Ron absolutely can’t be trusted with anything nowadays.”

Ginny laughed agreeing wholeheartedly and patted the quilt of her bed in invitation.

“Come, sit down, it’s been far too long since we had a chat between girls, or any chat really,” she sighed shaking her head and looked the other girl directly in the eyes. “Hermione, what on earth has happened?”

It was a loaded question she knew, but couldn’t help her bluntness, too tired of this charade and desperately needing some answers at last. Hermione seemed to debate with herself for a few moments, before coming to a decision and taking out her wand. She locked the door and secured the room expertly with several layers of privacy wards.

_Now, this does not bode well, does it?_

Ginny skidded over to make room for her as they made themselves comfortable on the bed.

“How good is your Occlumency?”

Ginny blinked mildly shocked already and they had not even started yet.

_No, this does not bode well at all.

“I’ve been instructed in the basics, just like any other pureblood before school, but ever since Tom took possession of me I’ve been very good all of a sudden,” she confessed. “I think he has built up strong shields in my mind to prevent random detection by a teacher or Dumbledore himself and I simply took them over.”_

Hermione nodded accepting it without question.

“This must not leave this room, Ginny, I need your word on it,” she implored holding out her wand.

Ginny took hold of it and swore an oath without hesitation. There was no going back at this point anyway.

Hermione relaxed straight away. “Well, took you long enough to corner me,” she regarded her
pursing her lips in amusement. “I’ve been expecting it sooner. Where did that Gryffindor courage go?”

Ginny scoffed and rolled her eyes smiling in return. “Now spill it, girl, I’m itching here!”

“The whole thing is quite simple, if you think about it,” she obliged turning serious. “Harry and I have had enough. Enough of the lies everyone around us is trying to stuff down our throats. Enough of Dumbledore’s games, Voldemort’s too, and enough of being ignorant pawns on this chessboard they have set up between themselves ever since before our birth.”

“This sounds quite hefty,” she contributed after a through consideration of possible meanings and consequences. “Care to elaborate?”

“I do, though it’s hard to pinpoint where it all started exactly, not to mention where it’s going to end,” she smiled tiredly. “I suppose Sirius’ death has been the decisive stimulus for Harry to finally open his eyes and realise that something was not right with the way Dumbledore has been handling things, particularly concerning him and his upbringing in both the magical and the muggle world.

As a result he has started digging around, approaching people he has never talked to much before and asking for information he was not aware that he actually needed. This is how the extent of Dumbledore’s transgressions came to light. And girl, you aren’t going to believe the nerve of the bastard! I had trouble when Harry confided in me, but the evidence simply didn’t leave room for speculation!”

Ginny listened completely taken in. This was big indeed, really, really big!

“He was deliberately kept ignorant of everything, Gin, and by everything I do mean everything; his family, social status, political power, and not just that. He had no idea of the structure of the wizarding world and its workings, the existence of the great Houses for example and everything accompanying it. He has not been raised nor trained to become the Lord of his House, leaving him completely at the mercy of the Headmaster! Can you believe that any given muggleborn was more knowledgeable than him?”

That did explain quite a lot actually, and being a pureblood she understood the gravity of these offences all too well. Bloody hell! If only her parents knew...

“What about Ron?” though she had a good idea of the answer already.

“Ron knew of his ignorance of course, but obviously has decided to not enlighten him,” Hermione sneered in response.

*I’m going to kill him!*

As if reading her thoughts, Hermione put a hand on her arm to placate her.

“Leave him. He’s not worth the hell your mum is going to give you.”

She nodded yielding to the point, then sighed and shook her head in a futile attempt to clear her thoughts.

“What are you going to do?”

“What do you think? Harry and I are our own side now,” she looked her over appraisingly, “and I suppose you’re welcome to join, though we’ll have to talk to Harry first.”
Ginny raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh, great, as if I want to be a part of this suicidal madhouse.”

“Of course you do,” Hermione shot back unfazed. “Where would be the fun in life without a bit of adventure?”

They did not manage to hold it even for a second, before bursting into a fit of giggles. Taking the opening Ginny pounced mercilessly.

“Speaking of fun and adventure, who’s the lucky guy?”

Hermione threw her head back groaning in exasperation.
On the Hogwarts Express

The first of September was finally upon them and Harry was leisurely taking a shower after his usual morning exercises. The downside of having longer hair was of course that it took longer to take care of it, but he did not mind. It did look really good on him and was not hanging in his eyes anymore, bound back in a messy ponytail just reaching his shoulder blades. His scar was now for everyone to see, which he was not completely comfortable with, but reasoned that since his face was well known in public by now it made no difference if he hid it or not, they all would stare anyway.

Ron was still snoring when he entered their room, changed into his school uniform, which now had a shiny prefect’s badge pinned to it, and began packing the last of his belongings. They would be taking a Portkey directly to the platform this time, courtesy of the soon to be ex-Minister of Magic, who probably considered it to be in his best interest to ensure the safety of the Chosen One and his friends by any means available. Yet another scandal was the last thing he needed right now after all.

Feeling charitable today he hit Ron over the head with a pillow.

“Wha..?” he shot up blinking sleepily.

“Get up, Ron! You won’t get breakfast if you are late you know. The Portkey is not going to wait.”

Grumbling under his breath the red-head dragged himself from under the covers and began fumbling around for his things. Satisfied Harry levitated his trunk down the stairs and lined it up with Hermione’s and Ginny’s standing there already. He had instructed Hedwig yesterday to fly to Hogwarts on her own, figuring she’d be happier that way.

The girls were chatting with Mrs. Weasley when he entered the kitchen and greeted them smiling broadly.

“My, aren’t we exuberant this morning. Have we missed something?” Ginny enquired watching him sit down and help himself to toast and eggs heaped up high before him.

Harry had an answer or two to that, but with Mrs. Weasley in hearing distance simply settled on pouring himself a cup of tea and turning his nose up, very much à la Hermione at her worst.

“Can’t a guy just be happy to return to this prestigious educational institution called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry after a summer of enduring idle female wittering and looking forward to the broadening of his knowledge and spell repertoire, instructed by the best of their respective field of magic?”

He was faced with a moment of wide-eyed silence, before they all dissolved into mirth.

“Blimey Harry, you’re definitely spending too much time with Hermione!”

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The Portkey had delivered them to a secluded corner of the platform five minutes before the train was due to depart, where they were met by Tonks and ushered immediately on board. She and Kingsley Shacklebolt turned out to be the Ministry designated Aurors accompanying the train to Hogsmeade. They shuffled through the carriages for a while weighed down by their trunks, until they finally found Neville and Luna, who were saving them seats. To their surprise, Ron decided to join Seamus, Dean, Lavender and Parvati in the compartment next to them instead. On second thought, it was not surprising at all Harry mused, nor a big loss, since they would be able to talk
openly.

After settling in Harry cast a few wards to give them some privacy, while the girls were squealing and gushing over Luna’s ring, Harry’s hair and their summer experiences. He and Neville exchanged equal looks of suffering, no matter how mature and reasonable, girls would always be girls. They had corresponded extensively over the summer, but there were still things Harry had saved up, preferring to discuss them face to face rather than in a letter. Therefore, he was quite relieved when they were finally done.

“Now that we are on top with the newest gossip...” Hermione thumped him here “...I’d like to address some serious matters.”

He turned to face Neville and Luna directly.

“We are on the brink of another war, as you all undoubtedly know. The last time there have been three possibilities for people to choose from, join Voldemort, join Dumbledore or stay neutral, if you can. This time I fear the conflict is going to take on such enormous proportions that staying out of it would be simply no longer available.”

Neville nodded his agreement, so Harry took a deep breath and continued.

“And therein lies the problem, because I for my part would rather not join Dumbledore, for well known reasons, and many people wouldn’t want to either. The same goes for the other side, many would rather not join Voldemort, but won’t have any other options, because Dumbledore and by extension the Ministry won’t give them a chance.

The question is then, what am I going to do? I’m not just any celebrity, I’m the Boy-Who-Lived. That aside, I’m holding a wide-reaching political power, not to mention an enormous fortune, in my hands...”

“You have forgotten your magical power and skill,” Hermione interrupted.

“Yes, that too,” he conceded nodding in her direction. “To make it short, I’m in an excellent position to show the Headmaster the finger and establish my own side in this war. A grey zone between the Light and the Dark open to all people and creatures who are against Voldemort, yet don’t agree with Dumbledore’s ways, with no regard to their background, as well as their inclination to actually fight or simply stay out of this mess entirely.”

He paused to let it sink in before continuing.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve done just that already and managed to recruit Hermione, Ginny and a couple of others as well. That said, you and Luna are officially invited to join us whenever you wish,” he finished smirking slightly. “But don’t take too much time or the best offices will be sold out.”

Neville looked over to his fiancée who nodded once smiling dreamily, then turned to lock eyes with him, conveying his sincerity.

“Then we are officially in.”

Harry beamed at them relieved, as did Hermione and Ginny next to him. Not that he had expected anything else, but still.

“Very well, welcome to The New Order.”
Neville raised his eyebrow at that.

“Yes, I know it’s not very original, but it has the distinct advantage of being easily confused with the Order of the Phoenix, allowing us to speak of it in public, without fearing suspicion.

Anyway, Hermione and I have decided that a government resembling structure would be best for this organisation, so may I present our Secretary and Weaponry Development Liaison,” he gestured to Hermione and Ginny respectively. “I am the Leader of course and at the moment in charge of recruitment.”

“How exactly are you going to maintain secrecy?” Neville asked. “It didn’t work well the last time, did it?”

“No,” Hermione, who had been rummaging around her trunk turned to them with a simple wooden box in her hand. “But we were just a bunch of children playing rebellion, nothing more. Now, we are more or less adults facing war and I assure you that this time we will leave nothing to chance.”

She sat down, opened the box and took out a blood quill and a rolled-up piece of parchment.

“This is a binding magical contract, which is to be signed with blood and sealed with your magic to circumvent Veritaserum and any other known means of interrogation. In doing so you are pledging loyalty to The New Order and Harry James Potter as its leader, to be exact, to keep his secrets, as well as those of the other members and manage tasks and responsibilities entrusted to you to the best of your ability. The names of all members will become visible to you as soon as you sign. An attempt to betray the names of the New Order members or their secrets to their enemies will lead to your immediate suffocation. Wilful neglect of your responsibilities will have various consequences, all of them quite nasty."

She regarded them with an uncharacteristic hardness in her eyes. “Keeping that in mind you should never agree to take on a task which you know is beyond your abilities or goes against your principles. You will be forced to do it or face serious punishment. If you want out, you can anytime under the condition that you take an Unbreakable Vow to keep your knowledge of this organisation to yourself and never try to undermine our activities in any way.”

Luna smiled approvingly, while Neville whistled impressed, his eyes the size of saucers.

“She had too much time on her hands and unrestricted access to the Black family library,” Harry explained innocently.

Hermione handed the contract and quill to Luna to have her hands free to punch him on the shoulder, while their friends signed and sealed it.

Neville looked over the names eagerly. “Wow, you actually managed to recruit Snape! Have you promised him your firstborn or something?”

“No,” Harry laughed, “he was quite amenable as a matter of fact. I don’t know if you’ve heard already, but Dumbledore has all but written him off.”

The other boy stared in disbelief. “Has he gone mad? Snape is rumoured to be one of the most powerful wizards in Britain, not to mention that he’s the youngest Potions Master since Paracelsus…”

“And as Slytherin as they come, which reduces his value in the old goat’s eyes to about nil,” Harry put in smirking. “All for the better though, his loss my gain. Snape is responsible for intelligence and potions, and he has offered himself as an instructor in duelling and strategy as well. Ginny and I have signed up immediately and you are welcome to join, if you’re ready to put up with the usual barbs.
that is."

“I’m ready to put up with a lot more than that, if it means to be able to take lessons from him, mate.” He blushed slightly. "Well, as long as they don't involve potions of course."

They all snickered at that.

“Then you’re all set, Snape is still Snape, even if he’s now ours,” Ginny commented. “I’m only glad that I don’t have him in Potions anymore, it’s my O.W.L. year you know.”

Hermione was about to open her mouth to reprimand her, but Luna interrupted.

“Let it be, he was forced to do something he didn’t want to for far too long. He and everyone else will be happier now.”

Neville handed the parchment and quill back, which were put away securely.

“Remus Lupin, William Weasley and the twins? You have been quite busy this summer.”

“Yep, how could I not with this slave-driver overseeing me.”

Hermione raised her hand to thump him.

“See, just my point.”

They all laughed heartily.

Harry and Hermione left shortly after to attend the prefect meeting. As soon as they were out of the way, Ginny pulled a bulging pouch out of her pocked and handed it over to Luna.

“I don’t know how you did it, but you were right. It was Theodore Nott.”

The door to the prefect compartment slid open to admit Granger and Potter to Draco’s and everyone else’s surprise. Boot immediately blurted an enquiry and it came out that Weasley had shoved his duties off on Potter to be able to grab the Quidditch captaincy. How unsurprising! He had been wondering the entire last year how the idiot had managed to land a position of responsibility at all. Dumbledore’s meddling most likely. No matter, this turn of events was quite fortunate indeed, placing him in a far better position to approach Potter inconspicuously.

The last month had been hell! Draco was glad to have finally escaped, yet couldn’t help worrying for his mother. The Dark Lord had left for Merlin knows where a week ago, but there was still his father, aunt Bella and her husband and brother in law, who all had decided to stay with family for unforeseeable future. Who would have ever thought he’d be seriously envying Nott of all people? Being an orphan was far more preferable to the madness he had to deal with his entire summer.

He sighed and forced his attention back on what the Head Boy and Girl had to say. The security had been tightened all around Hogwarts it seemed, meaning a stricter curfew and more late night patrols for them. Just great! If not for the influence and prestige, he might reconsider being prefect as well.

Theodore was waiting anxiously in the shadows beside his compartment door for the Gryffindor sixth year prefects to appear in the corridor outside on their patrol. He longed to see his Hermione again, to talk to her in person, to touch her and anything else she might allow. Her letters had been
open and cordial, conveying only positive feelings, yet he could not help this gnawing insecurity squirming in his guts. What if she had changed her mind? What if her declaration had been only a moment of madness that had passed as soon as it came? What if she felt nothing but pity for him and was only indulging him, because he had avenged her parents? What if..?

His bitter musings were interrupted by the carriage door opening to let through Harry Potter and the object of his dreams. He watched them checking the compartments, steadily approaching his own with his pulse somewhere up his throat, then slid the door open unable to wait anymore.

Hermione’s eyes lit up as soon as they settled on him chasing away the lingering fear, her beaming smile and pretty blush warming his very soul. Potter cleared his throat to gain their attention, making her blush even more when she realised he was still there.

“Erm... well,” Hermione stammered in an attempt at introduction.

“It’s alright, I know,” Potter smirked extending his hand towards him.

Theodore took it in complete shock. She had told Potter about him? And Potter approved? The handshake was firm and short expressing together with the look in Potter’s eyes the usual things a brother would towards his sister’s boyfriend. In a way Theodore was glad that he had not said them aloud, or he might have started laughing at the sheer incredibility of this situation.

“I can finish the last two carriages alone, if you want,” Potter winked at Hermione smirking even broader.

She glared at him embarrassed to the bone.

“Fine, but don’t you dare breathing even a word of this to the others!”

“Why would I need to?” Potter called over his shoulder on the way through the next door, sounding far too innocent. “They are going to think their part anyway.”

She huffed and rolled her eyes, but gave up shaking her head and turned towards him. Coming out of his stupor he stepped back to let her through and closed the door behind her, casting a locking charm and an array of privacy wards for good measure.

And there she was standing so close to him, holding him captive with her bright hazel eyes. So beautiful, a far cry from the state she had been in when he had seen her last! He could smell her unique odour, a mixture of vanilla and apricot with a note of fresh parchment and ink, powdery and alluring at the same time.

“Hi!” He cringed inside as soon as the word was out of his mouth. Really eloquent Theodore! But she did not seem to mind answering with a ‘Hi’ of her own. The moments stretched painfully between them, or was it just his cock in the confinement of his trousers? It was increasingly hard to tell, with the blood steadily leaving his brain for his southern regions. His lust must be written all over his face he could tell, Hermione though did not seem to mind that either, on the contrary.

Smirking knowingly she sat down in the middle of the cushioned bench and made a show of removing her shoes, before lying down completely, spreading her knees and reaching out for him in invitation.

Whatever control he still had at this point snapped in two. With a guttural growl he was on top of her, his straining shaft pressed firmly into her pelvis and his mouth plundering hers ferociously.

Bliss! He was quite sure he had died and gone straight to heaven, no matter how unlikely it was.
Feeling the softness of the body underneath him, his hands roaming freely, savouring her taste, even though he had not enough mind present to register what it was, only that it was intoxicating, his hips grinding into hers uncontrollably, sending jolts of pleasure down his spine with every thrust. It was complete and utter bliss!

Some part of his brain still functioning was telling him that his behaviour was atrocious, that he was humping the woman he loved like an animal in heat. He did not listen. He had been dreaming of this ever since he was old enough to get an erection, gentlemanly manners could wait until after he had come, for Merlin’s sake! And boy, he was close! The ultimate ecstasy was almost within reach. His thrusts became frantic.

*Just a bit... come on... almost there... oh, yes... COME ON!*

He stiffened, his body taut with anticipation, before crying out and shuddering violently as the most powerful orgasm he had ever had washed over him.

Coming slowly to awareness Theodore registered that he was feeling really, really good and must be still on top of Hermione, with his face buried in the crook of her neck. She moaned and shifted under him, so he rolled to the side to take his weight off her forgetting that the bench they were lying on was too narrow to fit two bodies next to each other and crashed painfully to the floor.

“Ow,” he sat up rubbing his shoulder, earning himself soft giggles coming from slightly above him. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“I don’t know. I’ve come to myself just a moment ago as well.”

He looked up at her horrified.

“I’ve knocked you out?”

“No,” she reassured him hastily, then blushed biting her lip. “I think I have experienced your orgasm.” She looked down at him pursing her lips. “It must have been yours, seeing as in all your exuberance you somehow managed to miss my clit.”

“Oh,” he commented blinking in confusion, before furrowing his brows and considering the possibilities. “Was it your first time with someone?”

She nodded blushing harder, but did not look away.

“As it was mine,” he confessed rubbing his chin deep in thought. “In that case it must have been some sort of binding magic, not as strong as it would have been had we lost our virginity for real, but still.”

He picked himself up from the floor and sat down facing her.

“I’ll have to research this,” he said placing his hand absent-mindedly on her thigh and raised his eyebrow, seeing her beam at him.

She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his lips. “And that, my dear Theo, is the reason why you are the only boy in this school I’m ever going to do this with.”
Hermione returned to their compartment ten minutes before they were due to arrive looking no different from when she had left, except for the distinctively brighter mood, to be met with all too knowing smiles.

“That good?” Ginny asked laughing at her reddening complexion.

“You would like to know now, wouldn’t you?” she turned her nose up and sat down with a secretive smile playing on her lips.

“Er... Neville and I would rather pass, thank you very much,” Harry spoke up looking slightly uncomfortable. “But we do want to know if you are planning to bring him into the fold anytime soon.”

“Maybe,” she said thoughtfully. “It’s too early to say for sure.”

Finally arriving at Hogsmeade Station they slowly made their way towards the carriages, greeting their year-mates and former DA members and even stopping to say hello to Hagrid, who was calling out for first-years in his usual booming voice. They split up to only four per carriage, because anything else would have been simply unreasonable at this point and reached the castle without incident. Entering the fortunately Peeves-free Entrance Hall they followed the stream of bodies to take their customary seats at the Gryffindor table.

The Great Hall was as magnificent as ever, yet Harry couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was missing. He looked over to the head table counting the familiar faces plus a new one, which he supposed belonged to one Professor Slughorn. Hagrid and Professor McGonagall were elsewhere of course, so nothing strange there.

He furrowed his brows in confusion. What the hell was it? Then it hit him. No blinding flashes of light, no annoying high-pitched voices. He looked up and down the Gryffindor table seeing neither Colin nor Dennis Creevey at it.

“Fuck!”

A sudden feeling of dread began spreading through his gut, while the sixth year Gryffindors sitting around him turned towards him in question.

“Where are the Creevey brothers?”

Everyone blinked once before starting to look all around the hall.

“Alice Mitchley, third-year and Robin Walter, seventh-year are missing as well,” Hermione informed him unable to hide the slight trembling in her voice.

“Muggleborn?”

She nodded confirming his suspicion. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“There are more people missing than there have been attacks, Harry,” Neville tried to ease his mind, “concerned parents preferring to leave their children at home rather than sending them to Hogwarts.”

He nodded seeing the point, but couldn’t get rid of this sudden feeling of guilt deep inside, no matter
how irrational it was. A remnant of the Dursley legacy he assumed, anything bad happening had been always his fault, beaten into him to a point where he began actually believing it.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath emptying his mind and began searching his memory for anything that might help. ‘It’s not your fault!’ echoed through his head uttered by many familiar and loved faces, not having any effect though. ‘Some things are simply beyond our control’ Hermione had once said, but the knot in his midsection lingered still. Then a tall, black-robed figure appeared sneering at him down its large nose. ‘As hard as it is for your inflated ego to believe, Potter, the world does not revolve around you!’

To his amazement he felt the knot of guilt unwind and disappear and opened his eyes to take in the concerned faces watching him.

“I’m alright,” he reassured them turning his attention towards the line of first-years following Professor McGonagall to the front of the hall.

_Who would have thought that one day Snape’s insults would be the only words I could trust unconditionally?_

His gaze landed on the Defence Professor, who seemed to be too busy sizing up this year’s haul to notice it.

_How on earth has it come to this?_

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Severus ate with his customary slowness, which gave him the opportunity to keep an eye on the entire hall, his own house table in particular. There were quite a few people absent from the ranks of the student body he could tell, and not only due to the recent wave of attacks. Honestly, he could not understand some parents’ stupidity, as if keeping them close by would make their children safer than here at Hogwarts.

His eyes travelled along his seventh-years. Many of them were going to be marked this upcoming winter solstice, some were more than eager, others definitely less so. He would need to act quickly there. Potter had promised him funds for safe houses and false identities, if he needed to bring them out of the country, though he had failed to mention were the hell he was going to get them from, with him still underage. Severus made a mental note to ask, he would need the money as soon as possible, although he didn’t worry too much about it, Potter was not someone to make empty promises after all.

His gaze went further down the table. Draco seemed quite subdued and understandably so after the summer he had. He only hoped that it had been enough to open his eyes to the reality of things, and that he wasn’t too stubborn to ask for help. Nott was sitting more or less alone as he was wont, eyes down and hunched over his plate. Clever boy!

“I was meaning to ask you, Severus,” Slughorn leaned over to him. “What can you tell me about our young Mr. Potter?”

Severus snorted schooling his face into a mask of distaste. “Why, Horace, haven’t the others sung his praise enough yet for you to form an opinion?”

Slughorn chuckled patting him on the shoulder, ignoring the glare sent his way.

“Ah, my boy, Minerva has warned me that you might be not entirely reasonable in that quarter, but still.”
“Well, he is definitely not the best of Potions students,” Severus sneered condescendingly. “How he has managed to scrap an E on his O.W.L. is beyond me to be honest. Must be Ms. Granger’s doing.”

“Ah, another bright mind I have heard much about,” Slughorn continued unfazed, “and very much look forward to become acquainted with.”

“You are reopening the Slug Club then I assume?”

“Of course!” Slughorn straightened pompously. “What a better way to forward house unity? Albus has given his permission immediately.”

“Indeed,” Severus bit back a sarcastic response or two taking a sip from his goblet instead.

Seeing that he was not going to get more out of him, Slughorn had thankfully returned his attention to Flitwick sitting on his other side.

Potter. He refrained from looking in the direction of the Gryffindor table, having noticed that he was doing so uncommonly often. The young Gryffindor had been occupying his thoughts regularly as of late, it was true. There was something different about him drawing Severus’ interest almost without conscious thought. Something he was dreading to examine closely, if he was honest with himself, and thusly had pushed away into the far corners of his mind to be ignored.

Some things were better left alone. No one knew that better than Severus Snape.

xxxooooxxx

Harry woke up early the next morning, did his exercises and headed towards the showers just when the others began to stir. He was quite proud to have managed twenty press-ups today, it was twice as many than only last week after all. The potions obviously did their work, even though they made him feel as if he was hungry all the time. No wonder Ron made such a fuss about attending meals punctually and never missed an opportunity to make a trip to the kitchens at any time of day or night. Harry smirked to himself washing his hair. In that regard he definitely shouldn’t have given up his prefect badge so eagerly, having no permission to be out after curfew anymore. He was still getting used to the fact that Ron no longer belonged to the circle of his closest friends. It didn’t mean that he would lend him the cloak or the map anytime soon though.

He dressed and went down to the common room to wait for Hermione, Ginny and Neville, the items in question shrunk and put away securely in his pockets. He had decided to have them and his broom on him at all times from now on, with his list of enemies one couldn’t be too careful.

The girls and Neville appeared soon enough and they made their way towards the Great Hall together ignoring the pointing and the whispers, which seemed to follow them wherever they went ever since last year.

“Any plans concerning the Order?” Neville asked softly.

“Nothing specific at this point,” Harry watched their surroundings carefully. “Keep an eye open for new recruits I’d say. If you have names already, make a list and give it to me. Beyond that, you’ll need to make an appointment with Snape to discuss your training. I’ll inform him about your status via owl sometime today.”

“He’s going to train us individually?” Neville sounded surprised.

“It’s less conspicuous this way, or so he says,” Harry nodded turning to him with an innocent smile. “But don’t worry, I’m pretty positive those vampire rumours aren’t true, so he won’t bite.”
“Ha, ha, Harry,” he grimaced seemingly unconvinced.

Hermione and Ginny could only roll their eyes following close behind them.

Breakfast was a noisy affair, as always on the first day of school. McGonagall passed them their schedules and the Head Girl followed up with their patrol schedules. Harry looked his over pleased to notice that he would have quite a bit of free time this year, only to remember a moment later that there were his extracurricular commitments as well. Damn! He believed he could really hate Dumbledore sometimes!

Dutifully, he made a copy and passed it over to Hermione, who was in charge of his non-combat related education. Merlin, this year was going to be hell! His only consolation was that he would be spitting into Dumbledore’s soup with every book he went through and every new bit of information he committed to memory.

The owl post arrived bringing him his paper and a letter from Remus, which he put away to read in a more private place. There seemed to have been no new attacks or disappearances since yesterday, so he pursued the statistics for the upcoming election at leisure. Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office, was still a top candidate according to the survey held in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley this weekend. Seeing as the election was only two weeks away Harry decided it was time to have a look into the man’s public records, as well as any others he might find access to, and gain a better understanding of who he would be dealing with when the time came. He had no illusions as to what the new Minister’s first political move was going to be.

Finishing their breakfast they went back to the Gryffindor tower to fetch their bags and the books they would need today. Harry had Transfiguration first, then Ancient Runes with the third-years after lunch. He did look forward to the subject, but most certainly not to the attention he would be receiving. It wasn’t everyday that a sixth-year chose an entirely new elective after all, and if he hadn’t needed this one very badly, he’d have preferred to study it on his own.

_Why? Why did I listen to Ron all those years back? Divination? Honestly, I should have dropped it after the very first lesson!_

Making a detour into the loo he opened the letter and applied the password to reveal the hidden content.

_Dearest Prongs Junior,_

_Dumbledore has approached me yesterday asking after the extent of your knowledge of the wizarding world. To be honest it came as a shock to me that he has actually confessed to my face that he has been trying to limit it since your childhood. If only Sirius had known..._

_But no matter, cub, I have told him that I have no idea what he was talking about and the ruddy bastard seemed to have swallowed that. It might be reasonable to assume that he is going to approach people close to you with the same question in the near future._

_Take care,_

_Moony._

Harry burned the letter and vanished the ashes before leaving the loo and making his way down to the common room. He had been expecting this ever since the reading of Sirius’ will, but had yet to decide what to do about it exactly. It was a bit late for feigning ignorance, the only other option would be therefore pretending to know everything. He would have to instruct the New Order
accordingly and see what Dumbledore was going to come up with to counteract this. Whatever it was, it was unlikely to be truly harmful, but without doubt very annoying.

Then he remembered Ron and grimaced inside. Knowing him he would spill without second thought, maybe even more than willingly in the hopes to gain standing with the Headmaster.

Ah, fuck! Your worst enemies are your best friends they say. How bloody true!

He began seriously contemplating obliviating him when a brilliant idea struck his mind. He could simply say that he had been only pretending to not know anything, because of Ron’s jealousy. He had been upset enough about his trust vault, just imagine how he would have reacted, if Harry had began flaunting his inheritance in his face.

Perfect!

Harry met up with his friends a smug little smile playing around the corners of his lips.

“Later,” he assured them seeing their questioning looks. “There’s a bit of trouble on the horizon, but I have a plan.”

The day flew by far too fast for Draco’s tastes and he was still unsure how to proceed. Should he start working on Blaise and Daphne or should he secure Potter’s support first to have a better bargaining position. And what in Merlin’s name could he offer Potter in the first place? Not to mention how to convince him to listen him out, much less to believe him?

He truly should discuss this with his godfather first he knew, Severus would certainly be able to help him. And if not for the topic of this conversation, he would have approached him immediately. However, with Severus and Potter being a volatile combination at best of times, he had every reason to tread carefully.

Setting aside his half-finished Transfiguration essay long after dinner he decided he’d better get it over with and go see Severus. He had to talk about his loyalties with him at some point in the near future anyway, so now would be as good a time as any. Arriving at the door he nearly raised his fist to knock, only to remember suddenly that the Potions Professor’s quarters weren’t his godfather’s anymore, so he turned and made his way towards the first floor cursing under his breath.

Knocking on the right door this time and more aware than ever before that he won’t have the luxury of turning to an adult for advise this easily in just a year’s time, Draco felt his insides clench unpleasantly. Yes, this uncertainty was very unsettling indeed! Everything had been so simple and clear only three months ago, now though he didn’t know all that well what to think, much less what to do.

The door opened revealing Severus’ harsh profile, which softened somewhat as it always did when seeing him. The summer seemed to have done him good, his frame had lost its gaunt appearance, as well as the tenseness present almost constantly these past couple of years.

“Good evening, Severus, am I intruding?”

“Not at all, Draco, come in,” he stepped back and gestured towards his couches. “Have a seat. Tea?”

Draco nodded sitting down on the simple, yet fine and elegant piece of furniture, which he sincerely doubted had been part of the inventory when Severus moved in. As a matter of fact, the only items in this room looking remotely used were his books arranged neatly on the fine mahogany shelves.
“I have taken the liberty to refurnish my rooms after my own liking,” Severus informed him haughtily obviously having followed his gaze. “Their original state has been simply unacceptable.”

A house-elf wrapped in a slivery silk scarf, pinned in place with a golden brooch, appeared with a soft pop and disposed a tea tray on the small table between them, displaying a pride and grace he had never seen in these creatures before.

“Thank you, Winky,” Severus dismissed her and she bowed and left almost inaudibly.

Draco could not help but stare openly. Pouring out two cups Severus put his before him and began fixing his own clearly amused.

“I do understand that a decently treated house-elf must be a novelty to you, Draco, but your tea is getting cold.”

Draco’s eyes became wider if possible, looking at his godfather as if he had sprouted a second head instead of making a joke at his cost. Fixing his tea on automatic and taking a sip he regarded the man sitting opposite to him almost warily. This Severus seemed to be more relaxed, more outspoken and definitely less afraid.

What gave him such confidence?

“The knowledge to have made the right choices for once in my life,” Severus answered enigmatically having read the question in his mind.

Feeling his face heat up slightly Draco took another sip of his tea, pondering the meaning of these words. Though unable to decipher them on so little information, he gave up filing them away for later references and concentrated on the reason of his visit instead.

“I don’t want to serve Him.”

Severus regarded him for a couple of moments as if gauging his sincerity, then smiled approvingly, making him feel lighter at once.

“I for my part am glad to hear it, Draco. Your relatives on the other hand, might not be as pleased.”

He snorted in amusement. That would be the understatement of the century.

“To be honest, I’m more afraid for my mother than for myself,” he answered becoming serious again. “I’m more or less safe here at Hogwarts. And as soon as I turn seventeen I’m going to be free to do whatever turns out to be the best in the summer before seventh year, having unrestricted access to money and all our property. In the meantime though, she would be exposed to any cruelty father and the others might come up with.”

Severus nodded deep in thought. “You could try and arrange for her safety with a third party,” he suggested after a while.


“No,” Severus sneered in return. “The Headmaster has little interest in the safety of Slytherins, much less Malfoys, not to mention that his protection never comes without strings attached.”

Draco blinked surprised, never having heard his godfather talk about Dumbledore that way before.

“There is another powerful and influential party around,” Severus continued refilling their empty
cups. “Have you not kept up with the news this summer, Draco? Surely, it could not have slipped your notice, who the late Lord Black has left his House to.”

Of course! Merlin, I'm an idiot! Draco could have slapped himself for sheer stupidity. The answer to his problems was sitting before his very nose all along!

“Though still underage, the Heir of the House Potter and Black is most certainly not without ways and means, as you can well think. And as long as she has done nothing to dishonour the House Black, Narcissa Black Malfoy is his responsibility, no matter her affiliations. In that regard I sincerely doubt he would refuse an official request on your side.”

Draco nodded distractedly in agreement plans already forming in his mind, not noticing the smug smirk pass across his godfathers lips, before he took another sip.
Tuesday they had their first lesson with the new Potions Professor and Harry was not sure what to make of him. He seemed to be a competent and experienced teacher and more or less fair towards all houses. But the way he was looking at him, made him feel quite uncomfortable to be honest, and not only him, Hermione and Zabini were on the receiving end of his beaming smile and copious compliments as well. That was until he had expressed his concerns to Hermione during lunch and was informed about the existence of the infamous Slug Club, which he was not sure what to make of either.

On the one hand it sounded like an excellent networking basis, on the other there was no telling if it was going to include the right people to be worth his time. Future Quidditch stars and shop owners were not something he was looking for to include into his own ranks. In the end he decided to simply wait and see, Zabini would be definitely a welcome addition at least.

Wednesday brought DADA with Snape, which was a mixed bag too. Gryffindor had lost twenty points for no reason at all, but the lecture had been absolutely fascinating. His hand was cramped up from excessive note-taking. He had believed Snape was passionate about Potions, that was nothing in comparison to how he spoke about the Dark Arts. By the end of lesson he was ordered to stay back, so he waved his friends off to lunch and stepped closer to the teacher’s desk. Snape secured the room with a wave of his wand before addressing him.

“My godson has informed me that he doesn’t wish to serve the Dark Lord. As a matter of fact, he has made plans to escape his father’s influence already.”

“Then I’m glad for him and you as well, but how does it concern us? Somehow I can’t imagine him wanting to work actively against them.”

“Indeed,” Snape seemed pleased with his observation skills, “but you are forgetting that he has a weakness. His mother is at her husband’s and sister’s mercy this very moment, which is understandably unacceptable for him as a concerned, if not loving son. I have recommended him to approach you as the future Lord of the House Black in this matter officially. You could include him into your ranks in exchange for protection.”

“No,” Harry’s eyes hardened suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?” Snape blinked taken aback.

“I said no, Snape,” he repeated coldly. “This is exactly how both Voldemort and Dumbledore are operating, blackmail, real and emotional, threats and all sorts of pressure, not to mention lies and subterfuge. This is NOT what I am going to do! This is NOT what the New Order has been established for, do you get it? Things are going to be done properly or not at all! I’m going to provide help to anyone who asks sincerely with no strings attached. If they want to pledge loyalty to me, they are welcome to do so, if not I’m not going to force them.”

“You are a foolish Gryffindor,” Snape whispered after a moment of pregnant silence, the look in his eyes was betraying him though, a mixture of admiration and fear he had seen only once before. It was the way Bellatrix looked at Voldemort. More unsettling was however the realisation that it was also horrifyingly arousing. Trying to hide his discomfort Harry crossed his arms with a sneer.

“Well, if you want a Slytherin reason so badly, then call it weak point prevention. An unwilling servant is always a liability, no one should know that better than you. Binding magic is all well and
good, but Dobby and Kreacher are evidence enough that even the strongest ones can be circumvented. Traitors in my ranks are the last thing I need!"

*Bloody hell, stop looking at me like that or I’m going to jump you here and now!*  

As if hearing the unspoken order, Snape straightened his face blank again and nodded his agreement.  

“There is something else I wanted to talk to you about. The funds you have promised me, I will need them as soon as possible.”  

“Oh, well,” Harry relaxed uncrossing his arms again. “I’ve pressed seven thousand Galleons out of the Daily Prophet in case you didn’t know, but there is another source of money I’ve never considered before and remembered only recently.” He smiled slyly. “Has Dumbledore ever mentioned what the Slytherin’s Monster was?”  

Snape face brightened in an almost childish excitement, an expression Harry doubted anyone alive had ever seen on him before, and decided he’d do better not to comment.  

“The basilisk... it is still there?”  

“I’d say so. Who was going to get rid of it anyway? And even though it’s likely to be all rotten at this point, I’ve looked up the prices for powdered basilisk bone and according to them we can still make several fortunes on the skeleton alone, not to mention the teeth.”  

“Indeed,” Snape had gained control again, though a slight embarrassment still managed to seep through his shields.  

“Are you free this weekend?” Harry asked hiding his amusement carefully, getting a stiff nod from Snape. “Then meet me in the Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom this Friday an hour after curfew and bring a broom and proper harvesting equipment and containers and such.”  

xxxxxxx

The rest of the week flew by uneventfully, if you don’t count the chimeras Hagrid had dragged before their Friday morning Care of Magical Creatures class. Merlin, they should consider themselves lucky to have all limbs still intact when lunch finally arrived. He did love Hagrid, but sometimes it was just too much!  

The afternoon was spent in the library finishing the last of his homework for the next week in the circle of the New Order. They had chosen an out of the way corner to hide in to be able to accommodate Theodore Nott, whom Hermione had finally managed to convince to join their study sessions. He was an alright bloke Harry supposed, still a bit jumpy and obviously incredulous about the fact that he was actually welcome. But it would wear off in time no doubt, Hermione would see to that.  

He sighed and opened the history book Neville had insisted that he absolutely must read. It was unanimously decided that history, politics, law and the Ministry should be the first topics for him to gain proficiency in, since he would probably need them the most in the near future. And it was interesting, it really was, but he simply wasn’t the type to sit and read all day, preferring hands-on experience to anything else. The expedition he had planned with Snape later that night would be definitely a welcome break.  

When the time was finally upon him, Harry crept along the halls under his invisibility cloak and reached the bathroom half an hour too early, yet considered it still better than waiting in the common room. Myrtle was somewhere else tonight fortunately, so he put his cloak away and sat down on a
toilet seat to pursue the map at leisure. Snape was in his office, as were most of the other teachers, Mrs. Norris was patrolling the dungeons together with Filch already, though the first prefects wouldn’t be out for at least another hour. A sudden movement in an empty storage room on the third floor caught his eye, two spots so close together that they were almost overlapping, the names read Theodore Nott and Hermione Granger.

Harry blushed and looked away immediately, that was definitely something he’d rather not know, thank you very much. Snape’s spot was now on its way to the second floor, so he cleared the map and put it in his pocket. Remus had promised to make several more, though he doubted the first one would be ready before Christmas, a complicated piece of charms-work like that simply took its time.

The door opened and closed seemingly on its own before Snape cancelled the Disillusionment Charm and stepped forward looking around curiously. Harry left his stall and gestured towards the sinks.

“There is an engraving of a snake on this tap over there. With a password in Parseltongue the sinks open to a huge pipe. Last time Ron and I pushed Lockhart in first to test if it was safe to simply slide down to the tunnels below the school, which it obviously was. We got back up holding Fawkes’ tail, that’s why I told you to bring a broom.”

He concentrated on the snake and hissed ‘open’. They watched the sinks glide aside revealing a dark hole.

“Well, after you, Mr. Potter,” Snape drawled silkily.

“Hang on... I just realised... Ginny, you know when possessed by young Tom, has been down there several times. How did she get up without a broom?”

“There might be another entrance?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry cast a Lumos and looked down the pipe. On the inside just below the rim was another engraving. Well, Slytherin’s passwords were rather simple, were they not? He hissed ‘stairs’ to it and watched the pipe twist and transform into a spiral staircase. “Ha!” he grinned at Snape in triumph, who simply rolled his eyes.

They secured the bathroom door and began descending into the bowels of the castle. The journey turned out to be shorter than they had expected, four or five floors at most. Finally reaching the bottom they saw the debris blocking the tunnel straight ahead.

“The ceiling caved in when Lockhart’s spell backfired throwing him into the wall,” Harry informed him without being asked. “Ron landed on this side and I on the other. He began digging an opening while I went on to the Chamber.”

“How heroic of you, Potter,” came the expectedly sarcastic comment.

“Yep, and just think, I was only twelve at the time,” he grinned unfazed. “Can you imagine the size of my complex now?”

Snape rolled his eyes again, but Harry could have sworn to have seen the corners of his lips twitch just a little. They widened the existing opening and climbed through. The shed snake skin shined vividly green in their wandlight and Snape went over to inspect it immediately.

“You haven’t mentioned this,” he levitated it of the floor and cleaned it thoroughly, before rolling it up and putting it under his arm.
“It has slipped my mind to be honest. It’s worth something then I assume?”

Snape snorted in derision. “Potter, your ignorance knows no bounds.”

“Well, thank Dumbledore for that, will you!” Harry spat out angrily and looked away feeling somewhat hurt. What the hell was up with him? He had been able to brush off Snape’s insults so easily in the past, where did that go?

Raising his Occlumency shields he pushed everything away and turned to face him.

“Let’s go,” he started down the tunnel without looking back.

Snape was regarding him oddly, but didn’t say anything, simply following him.

They reached the wall with the two intertwined serpents and Harry hissed ‘open’ preparing himself for overwhelming stench, only to be met with a whiff of cold air when they slid apart. A glance at Snape showed that he was surprised as well. They entered the Chamber and saw immediately why, the basilisk lay on the floor completely intact, looking like it had been slain a mere hour ago.

“There must be preservation charms or something on this place,” Harry speculated aloud, “all the better though.”

Not receiving any answer he turned to Snape, who seemed to be engrossed in beholding his surroundings with a mien of restrained reverence, and had to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing. This must be a monumental moment in the life of any true Slytherin after all. He cleared his throat loudly to remind him of his presence and gestured towards the basilisk, not even trying to hide his amusement.

“I know this must be very exciting, but we have work to do. You can bring a camera next time if you want, seeing as we won’t be able to take care of the whole beast all at once tonight.”

The glare sent his way must have been a personal record, but didn’t lessen Harry’s mirth in the least.

Taking the control of the situation back in hand Snape put the rolled up skin on the floor and started outlining their workload. They would need to harvest blood, venom, scales, teeth, skin, innards and bones. The meat was entirely useless and should be disposed of safely, since it was highly poisonous if consumed.

“The whole beast is worth approximately two million, likely three, considering that the last confirmed sighting of a basilisk has been about two hundred years ago,” Snape informed him enlarging an old but well kept multi-compartment trunk and opening the lid.

Harry whistled impressed. “Then I have to seriously ask myself why Dumbledore hadn’t tried to recover it three years ago. Slytherin’s or not, gold is gold, and wars usually don’t pay themselves on their own.”

Snape straightened frowning. “I must admit it is a good question.” He thought it over for a moment then brightened in sudden realisation.

“It is yours, Potter,” seeing Harry’s confusion he continued. “The beast is yours by law, since you have been the one who has slain it. He would have to put all the gains acquired from the sell-off into your trust vault, or the goblins would have accused him of embezzlement.”

“Ah,” Harry commented hiding his anger behind his shields. “So, he has simply decided to let a source of priceless potions ingredients rot away would be a lesser evil than a twelve-year-old with
three million in his hands.”

“It would seem so,” Snape concurred drily taking out a nondescript piece of cloth and gesturing for him to come closer. “I need you to levitate the body while I scale it.”

The procedure turned out to be quite simple. Harry levitated the snake about four feet in the air, while Snape cleaned it and spread the enlarged cloth underneath before casting a Fish-Scaling Charm as gently as possible, letting the iridescent, emerald green platelets fall down on it in a beautifully sparkling shower. After they were done Harry let the body down on the second piece of cloth Snape had spread further away. He had time to think a bit, while Snape was transferring the yield into specifically charmed boxes, which counted, sorted and stacked the scales on their own.

Dumbledore had gone too far in his meddling yet again and there had to be a way to retaliate for it somehow. There just had to! Three million, it was the equivalent of the entire Potter fortune, how could one allow that to simply rot away? And it would have, if not for the preservation charms luckily still working after a thousand years!

Then, a brilliant idea struck him spreading an awfully gleeful smile over his face. Snape had finished and glanced briefly in his direction, only to do a double take with his eyebrow raised.

“Why do I have the notion that someone is going to end up in pain?” he deadpanned being all too familiar with that facial expression.

“Ah, Professor,” Harry was till grinning like a maniac. “In how high a dudgeon do you think our dear Headmaster is going to be when he finds out that I got something he has gone to great length to keep from me, hm? So, why don’t we simply make the sale public and let the goblins handle it?”

Snape regarded him for a couple of moments with both eyebrows in his hairline. “You are evil, Potter,” he smirked finally, getting only a deep cackle in response. “You truly are.”

xxxoooxxx

Late at night on Saturday Severus was on the way to his usual apparition point in the Forbidden Forrest, under the pretence of answering summons. Once he had reached the glen, he hid his appearance under Glamour Charms and apparated to Diagon Alley, making his way through the nearly empty street towards Gringotts. Goblins did not have such a thing as business hours, so he slipped into the bank feeling relieved despite himself. Carrying three million worth of potions ingredients on his person tended to make one slightly jumpy after all.

He and Potter had attended breakfast this morning to avert suspicion and returned to the Chamber afterwards to finish gutting the remains. And yes, he had brought a camera with him, it had been definitely worth any embarrassment involved. After burning the waste they had taken a look into the snake’s lair in the mouth of the statue and had actually found two dozen more shed skins, each smaller than the other, but nonetheless precious. And now he was waiting before the counter, while the goblin read Potter’s letter, giving him full authority to manage the matter at hand in his name.

Severus could honestly say that he had never been in a situation like that before. None of his former Masters had ever entrusted him with anything of value beyond information. And here was Potter, who had shoved more or less three million into his hands seemingly uninterested what he was going to do with them, as long as it was for the good. In the face of that, generosity had received an entirely new definition in his books.

Confirming his identity he opened a vault specially fitted for ingredients storage and took a cart to make his deposit. It was an interesting experience he had to admit. Who would have thought that a
goblin’s eyes could get that huge? Back on the surface he requested to see Potter’s account manager and was led into his office to wait. Believe it or not, the goblin in question appeared less than ten minutes later. Knowing firsthand that goblin elders usually did not do that, he could only assume that Silvertooth had received the inventory list of the new vault already.

The business was concluded in short order, for a fee of three per cent the goblins would sell two thirds of any type of basilisk parts in the storage for the best prices available and deposit the gains in the yet another vault he had opened there and then.

Returning to Hogwarts with two golden keys in his pocket he was met in the Entrance Hall by the Headmaster, who enquired if he had managed to gain something new.

“No, Albus, nothing of importance;” he grumbled ruefully accepting Dumbledore’s pitying smile with all due grace. The Monday morning Prophet could not arrive too soon in his opinion.
Of Desires, Pains and Duties

Sunday crept by at a leisurely pace, as it always did nowadays. Severus had finished the last of his markings and had developed his photos, sitting and sorting them now for the lack of anything better to do. Looking back on these last couple of weeks, he was feeling quite pleased with the progress of things. His life had finally taken a turn for the better. After thirty-six years of fear, pain and misery, well, it was about time!

Picking up a picture of himself leaning against the statue of Salazar Slytherin with his arms crossed and glaring in the general direction of the camera, he couldn’t help smiling slightly. Potter had insisted to take it as evidence of sorts that Severus had been down there for real or no one would believe him otherwise. He snorted, as if he was going to tell anyone in the first place. On second thought, maybe Draco one day.

Potter. A new development had come to light in that quarter and he had yet to decide what to make of it. His young Master seemed to have acquired feelings for him of all things and he couldn’t determine if it was just hormones or actually something more substantial.

Severus had noticed the presence of a certain something in his eyes whenever Potter was looking at him with his Occlumency shields down, and having taught at a school full of hormonal teenagers for sixteen years, had recognised it immediately. Admittedly, unlike almost every single one of his younger colleagues, he had never seen this particular look directed at himself even once in the entire course of his career.

This should definitely rule out hormones then.

He had to concede that he was quite flattered. Uncertain and confused, but flattered. Even outside of school setting he could count the times anyone had shown him some sort of admiration on just one hand. Always a fellow Death Eater and always after a particularly bloody raid, so nothing to be proud of you see.

He had come to terms with the fact that he was completely undesirable long ago. Academic brilliance apart, he had nothing of interest to offer to make up for his appearance and disposition. No money, no influence and though pureblood and still the Head of his House, no social status. He was a powerful wizard, but had made it into a rule not to showcase his abilities too much, thus he couldn’t understand how anyone would be able to develop feelings for him, much less a teenager, and even lesser Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Heir of House Potter and Black.

However, the facts were speaking for themselves. Potter was trying to hit on him, very subtly and unobtrusively so, he had to compliment him, but perpetually. Worse though had been the realisation that discouraging him was the last thing on Severus’ mind. What could he say? Potter had grown into a handsome young man and started filling out quite nicely, and though still having much of his father in him, was no longer his carbon copy.

The question was then, was he going to encourage him or continue pretending not to notice? If he was honest with himself, Severus had to admit that he was afraid. Not of the consequences of course, if anything conducting an illicit relationship with the Chosen One right under Dumbledore’s nose was making it all the more tempting. But there was the rather reasonable assumption that with the greater part of Hogwarts population at his feet Harry most likely had sampled his fair share, Severus on the other hand was a completely virgin territory.

He was quite knowledgeable of course, but the only actual experience he had was a kiss with a
random Ravenclaw boy, who most likely had been dared into it in their sixth year. To make it worse, Black had witnessed it, happening to pass that particular row of shelves in the library at the time, meaning it was over the school within hours. Both of them had been subject of ridicule for month, and afterwards everyone knew better than to get involved with him in any way.

He sighed gathering the pictures and putting them into an envelope to be sealed and stashed away safely. Tonks had asked him once what reasons he had to hate Black so vehemently. Honestly, what reasons he did not have, would have been easier to answer. Nothing for it though, he would have to dig up his books to have the techniques fresh in mind and then simply wait and see what Potter was going to do.

He shouldn’t raise his hopes up too greatly anyway, lest it came to nothing at the end of day. The young man could come to his senses and turn his attentions towards a more suitable party any moment after all. It was not his place to make advances on his Master, not to mention a man so high above him that being seen as his regular bed-warmer alone would propel him into circles of society he would have never dreamt of ever belonging to.

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Harry was eating his breakfast Monday morning for once impatiently waiting for the post to arrive. Dumbledore’s face was not the only one he was looking forward to see, not having informed his friends of his little stunt yet. Ron’s was likely to be priceless as well. So, when the tell-tale rushing of wings accompanied by soft hoots finally reached his ears he couldn’t help straightening in anticipation, even though his expression was showing nothing but dispassionate calm.

He had been fixed on the owl with the paper so much that he almost hadn’t noticed the magnificent Eagle owl landing before him and stretching its leg out with an expensive looking envelope attached to it. Recognising it to be Malfoy’s he removed the letter and offered it a strip of his bacon, which it graciously took before flying off. He put the letter into his pocket shaking his head in amusement. *Trust a Malfoy owl to have airs!*

He unrolled the paper and smirked at the headlines feeling quite pleased with himself. Taking an inconspicuous glance at the head table he saw Dumbledore’s face go whiter with every word he read.

*Yes! Take that, you bastard!*

He caught Snape’s eye and graced him with a sly smile before looking down to pursue the article in front of him.

**BASILISK PARTS FOR SALE!**

A representative of the Gringotts bank has contacted us yesterday with the announcement of a pending sell-off of a hitherto unseen amount of exceedingly rare potions ingredients: blood, venom, all kinds of innards, teeth, scales and powdered bone of a basilisk, as well as about 200 feet of shed skin.

The sale is conducted on behalf of none other than Mr. Harry Potter himself, who is rumoured to have slain an over twenty feet long basilisk, otherwise known as Slytherin’s Monster, at the age of twelve in the context of the opening of the infamous Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by You-Know-Who four years ago. Background history turn to page 5, interviews with the eyewitnesses turn to page 8.

Considering the current market value of any and all basilisk parts the beast in question is likely to
yield several million Galleons worth of potions ingredients. A price which is going to be paid without second thought by the Potions Masters Guild, as well as the Ministries and private individuals all other the world, who are almost duelling to secure the best seats in the Auction Hall this very moment. Press statements turn to page 10.

Why the much sought after ingredients were released only now is a question this reporter has yet to find an answer to.

By Beth Belby

Putting on his most innocent smile he looked up and right in to the slightly shocked eyes of Hermione Granger. To either side of him Neville and Ginny just stared in disbelief. His fellow Gryffindors, except for Ron who seemed to be brooding in silent jealousy, were whispering among themselves and pointing in his direction, as did the rest of the hall.

Neville recovered first. Taking a glance at the head table and seeing the thunderous cloud over the Headmaster’s face, he turned towards him with lips pursed in amusement.

“My friend, you are a closet snake, if I have ever seen one.”

Harry sighed and nodded pretending to be ashamed.

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Severus had to say he was seldom this amused sitting in the shadowed corner of the 12 Grimmauld Place kitchen and watching his fellow Order members bubble in excitement, while Dumbledore was trying hard to share their enthusiasm. It was a welcome respite from Slughorn’s incessant ramblings ever since the yesterday’s article. Their firm belief that this money was going to be open for the Order to use was absolutely hilarious! How Dumbledore would shuffle out of this situation was something he was very much looking forward to see. Admitting that he didn’t own the Boy-Who-Lived had to be a hard blow to his esteemed image indeed.

Finally, after the last member running late came in, Dumbledore called for attention and sat down.

“After being pelted with flocks of owls since yesterday morning I have decided to schedule this gathering to address the recent bit of news obviously bothering so many,” he smiled benevolently at their sniggers, before turning grave the next moment. “I have been asked explicitly what is going to be done with the funds gained from the upcoming auction. This question however is not for me to answer.”

The confusion on their faces nearly made him lose it. If not for his Occlumency, he would have been rolling on the floor right now. He really loved that boy!

Dumbledore sighed and deigned to explain. “The basilisk parts belong to Harry, thusly all funds gained from their sell-off are his to spend as he pleases.”

“But...” a single voice was coming from somewhere and initiating the procedure Severus liked to call ‘open mouth, insert foot’. “Doesn’t he always do what you tell him?”

Severus snorted not even trying to hide his contempt. Dumbledore graced him with a stern look, but did not comment addressing the question instead.

“In things concerning his safety and wellbeing, yes, but being neither his guardian nor a relative, it is not my place to dictate his expenditure.”
Realised that finally, have you? Took you long enough! It is going to be most amusing to watch you bend over backwards to try and gain his favour all in vain.

xxxooxxx

Making good use of Dumbledore’s absence Harry had scheduled a meeting between himself and Draco Malfoy in an empty classroom down the Charms corridor on the third floor that very evening. Unsurprisingly, the blond had arrived there first. Surprising however was the lack of the haughty contempt that had been marring his features prominently these past years, but was taken to new heights it seemed, since his arrival back at Hogwarts this September.

After establishing the security they greeted each other formally and sat down at one of the many empty tables. The absurdity of this situation was not lost on him. If someone had told him only last year that he would sit down to a civil conversation with Draco Malfoy and in a position of power no less...

“My Lord, I’m here to speak on behalf of my mother and in need of your assistance securing her safety and wellbeing in the near future.”

Harry knew that already of course, but nodded for him to continue, his face carefully blank. It was quite clear that he was not the only one here having trouble with leaving childhood grudges behind.

“Her situation this very moment is life-threatening and I would appreciate it if you do not divulge the information I’m about to give you to anyone.”

He nodded again and could see the tension in his opponents shoulders ease somewhat, though the confusion in his eyes betrayed that this reaction was not the one Malfoy had expected.

“He thought I would urge him to confide in Dumbledore. Well, definitely not happening anytime soon, no worries, he smirked inside, while Malfoy gathered his thoughts.

“After the outbreak this July the Dark Lord and his followers were using Malfoy manor for their headquarters,” he paused as if to gauge his reaction, so Harry was careful to give none at all. If anything, it seemed to unnerve Malfoy far more than angry shouting or spat accusations would have, but he continued in the same tone nonetheless.

“Making the Dark Lord’s acquaintance has allowed me to realise that pledging loyalty to him would not be advisable, not only in regard to my own interest, but also to that of the House Malfoy.”

Harry gave a half nod half bow in his direction agreeing and complementing him on his decision at the same time, but did not say anything leaning back instead, waiting for him to carry on. The blond was regarding him as if he had grown a second head at this point and only his upbringing seemed to restrain him from shifting nervously. However, not seeing any other way out compelled him to move on.

“Turning of age this coming June will make me independent and not only free to follow my own wishes, but also able to ensure my safety and that of my mother. Until then my best option is to stay low, seeing as my hands are bound by legal restrictions. I’m safe here at Hogwarts, my mother on the other hand is forced to endure my father’s company and that of her insane sister and her family, not to mention the Dark Lord and any other Death Eaters stopping by on daily basis. That is not acceptable!”

Malfoy straightened and met his eyes hard on, obviously emboldened by his righteous anger.

“Unable myself I implore you as the future Lord of the House Black to secure my mother’s safety, in
the knowledge that you have the means and power to do so. Any cost coming with it is going to be returned to you with interest, as well as my thanks.”

Harry couldn’t help the smirk appearing on his lips when Malfoy’s confidence began visibly dissipating as soon as the declaration was out of his mouth. No, Draco Malfoy was definitely not even close to Snape’s cut or even Nott’s for that matter, but he shouldn’t judge too harshly he supposed. To turn away from the path laid down to your feet since before your birth did need a lot of courage after all, courage he obviously did have, even though no one could ever accuse him of being Gryffindor.

“Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Narcissa Black Malfoy is my duty, Heir of House Malfoy,” Harry finally answered, “there is no need in compensation of any kind.” He smiled slightly while tilting his head. “Your thanks however I cannot refuse, seeing as they are yours to bestow upon whomever you deem worthy.”

Malfoy was staring at him mildly shocked, almost afraid, and Harry had to admit that it started getting to him. He could not remember to have had such an effect on anyone ever before. Well, with the exception of Mr. Garner of course, but at the time he had been trying to intimidate him deliberately, he had no such intentions towards Malfoy when coming here.

Deciding that he had enough of playing games he sat up straighter and put on a neutral, if somewhat serious expression.

“You will need to contact your mother and explain yourself and the current situation to her. Furthermore, I require her decision in regards to her future situation as soon as possible, particularly if she wishes to stay in the country or leave it for an unforeseeable amount of time.”

Malfoy jerked out of his stupor and found the presence of mind to nod.

“Tell her to have her packing done to the point where she could leave at a moment’s notice without looking back.”

Malfoy nodded again.

“Then, this would be all for now,” Harry rose elegantly and bowed to Malfoy, who returned it in equal measure, before removing the privacy wards and making his way to the door.

“Potter.”

He turned back and was met with a pair of calculating grey eyes under furrowed brows.

“Who the hell are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?”

A wicked grin split Harry’s face reaching all the way to his eyes. “The Gryffindor Golden Boy you mean? He’s dead I fear. I am what rose out of his ashes.”

He was through the door and starting down the corridor the next moment, glorying in the disturbed expression on Malfoy’s face despite himself.

xxxoooxxx

Albus Dumbledore carefully lowered himself into his chair in the Headmaster’s office and released a heavy sigh. He was getting too old for this, he really was. It had been a very long evening and he was far from happy with the outcome, even though he had managed to contain the damage somewhat.
Blasted boy! He had not seen that coming. How could he have indeed, if Ronald had assured him that Harry had never given any indication to know much of the wizarding world at all? On the other hand, Remus’ confusion should have been a warning sign, he could see it quite clearly now. Obviously, the boy had never given any indication to **not** know anything in his presence, or he wouldn’t have been so surprised at his questions.

*Damn it all to hell! How could I have miscalculated this badly? Where did it all go wrong?*

His bushy eyebrows furrowed suddenly. Maybe Ms. Granger might be able to bring some light into this? At least he would know the answer to the last question then for sure.
Uncomfortable Talks

Merlin, he really did not want to do this! And if there was any other alternative Harry wouldn’t be standing in front of the hospital wing door, desperately gathering his rapidly fleeing courage.

_Damn Dumbledore! Damn him to all hell! The bloody meddling..._

He took a deep breath and emptied his mind preparing to face what would in all likelihood be the most humiliating experience of his short life, while pushing the door open and taking a cautious peek inside. It was Saturday afternoon and the ward therefore blissfully empty. Sighing and thanking the Fates for small mercies he stepped inside and waited for Madam Pomfrey to appear.

Dumbledore would be at the Ministry the entire weekend to supervise the election in the office of the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot leaving Harry to pursue something he had been avoiding more or less deliberately for the past two weeks. He had not informed anyone of his current whereabouts knowing full well that he wouldn’t be able to ever live it down. Nothing for it though, sexual education in the wizarding world was obviously regarded with great importance and his knowledge consisted only of what he had gathered from the talks between boys in his dormitory.

This would simply not do! He was sixteen for crying out loud and embarrassment aside he was quite concerned about possible motives on Dumbledore’s side, which would warrant a withholding of that particular knowledge. No matter what the old coot had in mind, it just couldn’t be anything good.

The matron stepped out of her office a moment later, probably alerted by the wards that someone had entered and started looking him over immediately.

“Mr. Potter, what is the matter? I have hoped not to see you in here until the start of the Quidditch season at the very least.”

Harry could not help the smile spreading on his face. He had always liked her sense of humour, not to mention her unique understanding, no matter how much he abhorred being under her care during his stays in the hospital wing. Although, he could tell that this particular dislike had nothing to do with her personally anyway.

“I’m not going to play this year, Madam,” he tried to defend himself pouting slightly, before turning serious again. “There is something I need to talk to you about...” he looked around letting some of his nervousness show “...in private, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course,” she raised her eyebrow in curiosity, but ushered him into her office and closed the door behind them without further comment.

It was a very homely looking room, and if not for the desk and filing cabinets lining the walls behind it, he would have mistaken it for someone’s sitting room. He was gestured into a squishy chair in front of her desk and offered tea, which he gratefully accepted, seeing as this conversation was likely to be a lengthy one.

Sitting there he got the idea that she must be doing this sort of thing on regular basis, consulting students and teachers on anything and everything concerning health and general physical, and maybe even emotional, problems, and he could also imagine the female population of the castle seeking her out more often than the male. This realisation did nothing to ease his embarrassment though, rather added to it, if anything and prompted him to reinforce his Occlumency shields, lest he start blushing like a bashful virgin. That this was exactly what he was, would be beside the point of course.
He accepted his cup and took a sip gathering his thoughts. Madam Pomfrey seemed to give him any time he needed, which nearly made him blush despite his shields, so he simply took a plunge.

“Madam, I believe while gathering my muggleborn year-mates for the mandatory sexual education class in our third year you must have overlooked the fact that I’m completely muggle raised.”

Her eyebrows rose impossibly high at that and her stare said clearly that this was the last thing she had expected to hear. It took her a couple of moments to process the implication and the consequences resulting from it, before her brows lowered themselves forming a confused frown.

“Professor Dumbledore has assured me personally at the time that this matter had been taken care of already, Mr. Potter.”

“Has he now;” it came out as a soft whisper and far deadlier than he had intended, being a spoken aloud thought more than anything else. He blanked his face, though he could tell from the startled look in her eyes that it was too late and she had seen the anger boiling behind the mask already.

They regarded each other for a couple of moments warily and Harry decided to take control of the situation as long as he still could.

“In that case I’d appreciate that you do not inform him of my visit, or the topic of our conversation for that matter,” he had put just enough threat into his voice to make her understand.

“I am bound by vows to keep professional confidentiality, Mr. Potter,” she informed him straightening in her seat. She was presenting a confident front, though Harry could tell that the entire situation had unsettled her greatly.

“Very well,” he smiled slightly and leaned back taking another sip of his tea in an attempt to relax the tension. Antagonising her would be unwise regardless of her affiliations and if she turned out to be disposed to change sides, the more so.

Madam Pomfrey relaxed slightly and took some time to look him over, as if seeing him properly for the first time. Then, nodded to herself in obvious approval and returned her attention to her tea, waiting for him to proceed.

Harry had to wonder yet again what house she had been in. He had always believed her a Ravenclaw, now though he wasn’t so sure.

“Well,” he shifted in his seat, “I suppose we could leave out the birds and bees at this point...” he cleared his throat clinging desperately to his shields to keep his face from going up in flames. Madam Pomfrey didn’t even smile to her credit, if you don’t count the sparkle in her eye. “...but I definitely would like to know what differences between muggles and wizards there are exactly concerning sexuality, procreation and the legal side connected to them.”

“Well, Mr. Potter, the most obvious difference is the presence of magic of course, and because of that things considered impossible by muggles become no longer so. Secondly, things considered trivial suddenly gain a far greater meaning and consequence, not to mention that they can become far less predictable.”

She took another sip to gather her thoughts before continuing.

“Magic is deeply interwoven with the witch’s or wizard’s strength, will, intent and emotions, and seeing as sexuality is a very intimate interaction between the two or more of them it has a natural influence on the act itself and its consequences. The most prominent difference begins with the loss of virginity. It needs to be given freely otherwise the virgin’s magic will interfere and punish the
unwelcome offender. The act itself is unspectacular to be honest, the intent and emotions behind it however can turn it into a magical ritual of sorts and form an unbreakable bond between the participants, the nature of which would depend on their intent. Provided that the act is accompanied by a specific ritual in the first place, this phenomenon can be utilised to form almost any bond one can think of. In the wizarding society it is commonly used to form an unbreakable engagement or marriage. A bond of this nature is always legal and recognised by any Ministry of the world, seeing as it cannot be forced.”

“Is there literature I can inform myself from?” Harry asked most intrigued. This opened a whole new world of possibilities he would have never even considered before.

“Of course, Mr. Potter, the library has an entire section on the topic.” Suddenly she pursed her lips in amusement. “You will also find an extensive collection of books on all common and uncommon techniques and sexual practices known to wizardkind, of which I strongly recommend that you make a good use. Your peers most certainly already have.”

He did blush this time. Merlin help him, but that was definitely too much!

Taking a pity on him Madam Pomfrey continued with the explanation of homosexual pregnancy and magical means of contraception without further delay.

“I want you to know that I am far from condoning what the Headmaster has done, Mr. Potter,” she told him when he was about to leave. “Whatever his reasons, it was most irresponsible to withhold knowledge of such importance from you, especially you I should add. Merlin only knows what could have happened by now.”

Harry thanked her agreeing wholeheartedly inside, his previous anger returning full force. One day he swore the old man would pay for everything, with interest if he had anything to say about it.

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“Good evening, Headmaster.”

“Ms. Granger, good evening. Have a seat. Tea?”

“Yes, thank you, sir,” the girl took the indicated chair smiling and looking around with badly concealed curiosity.

It was always a pleasure to see a young mind so keen on learning, more so if it held as much potential as hers. Having spent the weekend in London he had decided to see her as soon as possible. He had let the matter lie for far too long as it was.

The yesterday’s election had yielded a quite satisfactory result. Rufus was known to be a man of action, just the right one then to take things in hand at the time of war. He would need to make an appointment with him one of these days, but first things first. The pleasantries out of the way, he sat down with an air of seriousness.

“Ms. Granger, I am glad to see you coping with your loss as stoically as you do. It takes great strength to overcome such grief and move on with one’s life and I am pleased to see that you have found it in you.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said softly lowering her eyes to her cup.

“I am also pleased to see your friends supporting you so diligently despite losses of their own to deal with. Harry especially seemed to have changed drastically in these past months.”
"Yes, sir, he is more mature now, less prone to anger or making rush decisions. I find it quite refreshing to be honest not to have to watch him constantly, lest he runs off and does something stupid again. I only wish I could say the same for Ron," she offered with a timid smile.

He returned it with a grandfatherly one of his own thinking that their understanding of what was stupid and rushed was quite different all the same.

"I have indeed noticed the two of you to have distanced yourself from Mr. Weasley ever since last term."

It was not a question, but she took it as one nonetheless.

"Yes, we are still friendly, but this unconditional understanding we had all these years seems to have disappeared. Ron still has a lot of growing up to do and Harry and I simply don’t have the patience to wait for that anymore."

He inclined his head once letting a bit of disappointment blend through the mask of sadness. This was bad news, more so because there was no way of mending the situation any. Unless...

"This is unfortunate indeed, Harry could have benefitted from Mr. Weasley’s knowledge of our world greatly, seeing as many duties await him after his turning of age."

"Oh, you don’t need to worry about that, sir. Harry is well aware of them and will undoubtedly do his best to fulfil the expectations coming along with his position. His knowledge of the wizarding world has improved quite a bit ever since he took a look on my pamphlets in our first year after all."

She gave him a reassuring smile, obviously trying to placate his fears, fanning them unwittingly instead.

"Though he has still a lot to learn," she grimaced. "His French is atrocious and ballroom dancing... well, you have seen for yourself in our fourth year, sir."

Dumbledore was fighting hard not to blanch. In a valiant attempt at grasping for straws he cleared his throat and prodded cautiously.

"I am glad to hear it, Ms. Granger. Harry was making an impression of someone not knowing much until recently, or so it seemed to me."

"Well, Ron is to fault for that I fear," she sighed apparently quite saddened. "It was clear to everyone from the very beginning that he had quite a few issues concerning money and standing, you see. Harry has decided not to wave his own before Ron’s nose for the sake of their friendship, not that it has worked out well in the end anyway."

He nodded in understanding forcing a smile and thanking her, before sending her on her way with his best wishes. Things were evidently far worse than he had expected.

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Giving the current situation a lot of thought did not bring any acceptable solution. One thing was absolutely clear though, that it was too late to re-establish a firm hold on the boy at this point. The only option still available was to try and take the role of a trusted mentor, to gently steer the boy in the desired direction. For that to happen he should be well advised to inquire after Harry’s plans, seeing as he had not the slightest clue what the boy was going to do with that much money in the near future. A suggestion or two of his own would certainly do no harm as well.

He had assembled his usual shield of Minerva and Severus, plus Remus for good measure, the very
next evening in his office. Watching his Heads squabble while Remus wisely kept his mouth shut, busy with neatening non-existent creases on his brand new robes instead, did not hold the same amount of amusement it once did though.

Harry arrived punctually at the appointed hour and took a seat next to Remus after declining the offers of tea and sherbet lemon as usual.

“Well, my boy, you might have already guessed why I have asked you here,” he twinkled good-naturedly, before turning serious again. “Nonetheless, returning to the Chamber of Secrets without informing anyone has been needlessly reckless of you, Harry. Merlin only knows what could have befallen you down there and no one would have had the slightest idea.”

The boy hung his head looking somewhat chastised. A very good sign where Dumbledore was concerned, maybe it wasn’t all lost yet.

“I know, sir, but I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Well, that he definitely had managed most successfully.

“Well, but I must advise you to show a bit more caution in the future.” Receiving an honest looking nod he continued carefully. “Have you at least given some thought as to what you are going to do with that much money, my boy?”

“Oh, yes!” The boy lit up like glowing tinder in the wind. This on the other hand was not good at all. “I mean three million, wow, I didn’t expect the beast to be worth so much or I would have gone after it sooner!”

I have no doubt you would have, Dumbledore smiled indulgently while gritting his teeth inside.

“Well, I’m going to invest into the twins’ shop of course... er...” he bushed and looked away, “I already have as a matter of fact... unofficially. But please don’t tell Mrs. Weasley,” he hastily added. “Anyway, it has always seemed to be a quite promising venture and I was planning to have at least fifteen per cent of it.”

Remus congratulated the boy on his good instincts, while Severus put in the expected derogatory remark to be chastised by the others. Dumbledore was left to nod in begrudging agreement, only a couple of months in the business and their shop was miles ahead of Zonko’s already. At least now he knew for sure where the money for it had come from.

“Yes, this is all well and good, my boy, but I rather had war related business in mind, if you do not mind my bluntness,” he smiled grandfatherly throwing in some twinkle for good measure.

“Oh, of course,” Harry nodded solemnly, “I’ve plans in that direction as well. Donating to St. Mungo’s to be sure, but there is another project I’ve been thinking about a lot lately... an orphanage.”

He paused as if to gauge their reaction before launching into an explanation. “If there’s anything the wizarding world is severely lacking in, it’s childcare outside of family. Orphans are usually expected to be taken care of by close relatives or godparents, but with war being what it is there very well might be no one left. And not only war orphans, but also muggleborn who lose or are abandoned by their family would profit greatly from growing up in a wizarding orphanage instead of a muggle one. Then there are runaways to consider as well, they land on the streets as far as I can tell, because they have nowhere else to go, and so on...”

Minerva and Remus were beaming in pride and even Severus seemed to be impressed, so he decided to smile and keep his opinion to himself. Of what use would any such thing be in the upcoming
battle? Honestly, the boy needed to reconsider his priorities. Orphanages could be taken into consideration after the war was won after all, but Merlin help him if he should ever dare to say this aloud and in Minerva’s presence no less. Maybe, having her in attendance every time he spoke with Harry was not such a good idea as it once was as well.
Thursday the 19th of September downed in its misty glory and Hermione Granger was sitting at breakfast surrounded by her friends and excitedly awaiting the strike of eight forty-two, the hour of her birth, which would make her an adult in the wizarding world. She would be the first among her peers to turn seventeen this year, which did bring her enormous satisfaction.

When the time was closing in Harry, Ginny and Neville started a countdown to her absolute embarrassment and the confusion of the entire hall, with the exception of those few who were aware of her birthday date. As soon as one was chanted she felt the strangest of sensations, something like warmth was building in her centre and steadily spreading through her entire body. Reaching her right hand it turned the Trace on her wand into golden mist, before removing it entirely. Then, there was a small surge of power and everything was over before she could even blink.

She had to admit that she didn't feel any different from only a couple of minutes ago, while enduring the round of Happy Birthday sung by everyone in her closest vicinity and accepting their congratulations on the way to Charms. The absolute knowledge of the fact alone was elating enough though to add a skip to her step and a ridiculous grin to her face, which she was certain that she would have been quite ashamed of in any other circumstances.

Professor Flitwick had congratulated her before class and other teachers had followed suit at lunch, yes, even Professor Snape, it was tradition after all. Professor McGonagall had given her a present to her surprise, a beautiful journal adorned with her initials, though everyone else seemed to have expected something along those lines. Ginny’s whispered explanation had brought to light that it was a confirmation of her social status. She was a someone here and could therefore expect a treat on occasion. This definitely did not sit well with her liberal upbringing, but keeping in mind that being a muggleborn in such an archaic society was not a good position to start from, she supposed that she should milk whatever small benefits she could get.

Hermione Granger was not stupid and putting her foot in her mouth with S.P.E.W. in her fourth year had taught her a very valuable lesson, a lesson most muggleborn learned the hard way and usually too late. This world was ruled by the power, money and influence of the Great Houses and in their eyes she was a no one, unless she had the aforementioned power, money or influence to offer to compensate for her lack of name and status, not to mention knowledge. She had studied the workings of this society well enough to convince her father to take the Ministry representative’s words to heart and set up a dowry for her just in case.

It had been a very good thing in retrospect, even though it didn’t matter now with her inheriting everything anyway. Turning of age meant that she was available for marriage and without a proper dowry her prospects would not have been very high, if not non-existent. In that respect she also knew that she could consider herself very lucky to have landed a future Head of an old and respected House for a boyfriend, more so since he had been hinting at having serious designs on her hand, which was by no means a given. And even though Theodore loved her and would have married her anyway, she knew that on some visceral level he was as much of a bigoted pureblood as the rest of them and therefore quite pleased that his prospective bride would bring him twenty thousand Galleons and several houses to boot.

That was why she was unsurprised at the dowry question coming her way from the eager Lavender and Parvati, though everyone else seemed to be interested in it as well.

“Oh, come on, Hermione, you should start giving serious thought to your future now that you are of age,” Lavender lectured obnoxiously, with Parvati and several others nodding. “The extent of a girl’s
dowry is highly decisive in regard to her prospects and is usually public knowledge.”

Oh, really? You don’t say, Hermione had a hard time holding her sneer in, but seeing the attention of the major part of the Great Hall on her, she decided that there was nothing for it.

“Fine, if you must know,” she put her spoon down and turned towards the girl with a sickeningly sweet smile. “Ten thousand Galleons in liquid assets, two houses, one here in Britain, the other is a holiday property on the south coast of France, my parents’ business, which is worth approximately another ten to fifteen thousand and which I’m going to instruct the goblins to sell as soon as possible, and family jewellery,” she turned her nose up here for effect. “It might not be hundreds of years old, but it is still a decent set of my grandmother’s diamonds and pearls.”

With that she resumed eating her soup, giving no indication to take any notice of the gaping silence in the wake of her revelation, or the chocked coughing coming from where Ron was sitting. Seamus decided to take over the honours of rubbing it in and gave an impressed whistle.

“Twenty thousand Galleons? Not bad, girl,” he slapped Ron on the back several times despite him not coughing anymore and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Well, mate, I’d say you can get that one right back out of your head.”

The elder students and not only Gryffindors dissolved into roaring laughter, while Ron sprang up and stormed out of the hall, his fists clenched and face purple in anger. Hermione looked up catching Harry’s sly smirk and sparkling eye and answered them with her own. Revenge was sweet indeed!

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The rest of the day flew by quite uneventfully. Hermione had attended Arithmancy, while her friends were busy preparing a small party in the common room after dinner. It was great! More so, because they were reasonable enough to keep the alcohol to butterbeer and she saw neither hide nor hair of Ron the entire time.

Harry had given her the exquisite stationary set that she had been eying at Scrivenshaft’s for a while and a timepiece hidden in a beautiful bracelet. She had allowed him to get away with the later only because it was tradition though. She had received an array of cosmetic products from Ginny and the most wonderful set of midnight blue silk robes she had ever seen from Neville and Luna, which she had put on straight away, and yes, that was tradition too. Others who had ‘remembered’ her birthday had given her sweets and small trinkets as well. It was an excellent evening, even though she did remember with a sharp pang in the region of her heart that there would be no presents from her parents coming with the owl post tomorrow.

Still, it was definitely one of the best birthdays Hermione had ever had, although she became somewhat fidgety when the time began nearing curfew. She and Theo had a private celebration planned for later tonight. Guessing from his letter that it was likely to take place in the Room of Requirement, she got the strong impression that he and Harry must have exchanged notes at some point. And even though it did annoy her that they were plotting behind her back, it was at least a good sign that her men were getting along quite nicely.

Neville returned from bringing Luna to her tower ten minutes before curfew and flopped himself on the couch next to Harry, after grabbing yet another butterbeer. She turned back to Parvati to catch the last of the Witch Weekly article she and Ginny were discussing and found it quite interesting despite herself. The next time she looked towards the couch it was empty. Neville was with Seamus and Dean on the other side of the room joking and laughing, Harry however was nowhere in sight. She furrowed her brows getting the feeling that something was up, but was distracted by a question Lavender asked her. Seemingly the next moment Harry appeared behind her bowing with cocky
aplomb and gentlemanly holding out her school cloak.

“Sorry to interrupt you, ladies, but birthday or not, we still have rounds to do.”

The girls were bemoaning her fate on the way out of the portrait hole, she however was smiling inside. Her Theo was waiting.

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They parted at the main staircase. Hermione went on to her appointment and Harry down the stairs on patrol, or so it seemed. He waited at the base until her footsteps faded away before going all the way back to the portrait hallway. There was a narrow side corridor to his left where Ron had been lurking less than fifteen minutes ago, now though it was the place where Harry had hidden his stunned and bound body under Disillusionment Charm.

It was a good thing Neville had spotted him on the way back to the common room. Whatever his reasons, it would have likely ruined Hermione’s special day, so Harry was going to have none of that. He cast a few privacy wards and cancelled the spells.

Ron groaned and blinked up in confusion.

“Do I even want to know what you were doing here,” he was far from smiling.

The redhead’s face hardened at the realisation that his current position was Harry’s doing. He scrambled to get up and push past without a word, but Harry’s hand stalled him.

“I won’t allow you to ruin her happiness, Ron,” he informed him with a hint of steel in his voice.

“You’ve had your fair share of chances and it’s your own fault that you chose not to take them back then.”

Ron pulled himself free and stormed past him without looking back. Harry watched him retreat with a gnawing feeling that this was not the last of it.

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Theodore walked around the apartment the Room of Requirement had given him humming under his breath, while finishing the last of his preparations. For the first time in his life he could honestly say that he was absolutely happy. He got his cake and was even eating it, plus extra. In addition to that he could congratulate himself on accomplishing it under his own wits and power, which for a true Slytherin was always of enormous importance.

He sighed dreamily taking one last look around. Everything was perfect, as it should be on his Lady’s birthday. He was going to worship her tonight like never before. She was everything to him and he would make her understand that, and also the fact that she was his now, his to lavish with attention, his to love and his to make scream his name in the throes of passion. His cock twitched hopefully making him chuckle. All in good time.

Nevertheless, he was still amazed that Potter... Harry, he reminded himself, had entrusted him with the knowledge of this wonderful room. If anything, it was speaking volumes about in how high estimation he was held, and that was definitely something that he could have never dreamt of ever happening. Well, he might have had an inkling that entering a relationship with Hermione would open him the doors to the most exclusive circle at this school, but who would have expected that he would be welcomed there with open arms? He at least hadn’t. It was nice though to have... dared he say it... friends.
Life was good! But it could always get better, he smirked to himself and cast a Tempus. Only two minutes left, whoops, he definitely should get into the habit of daydreaming less. He doused the lights and opened the door leading to the corridor outside listening intently for approaching steps. And there they were, echoing through the empty hallways, even though they were light. A moment later Hermione appeared from around a corner holding her lit wand aloft to be able to see better. She smiled and came closer seeing him standing in the darkened entryway.

Merlin, she was beautiful! He couldn’t stop his eyes from roaming over her body and face. Those excellent robes she wore were not helping matters any, presenting her in the best way possible without being too revealing. He was a lucky bastard indeed!

She cleared her throat to remind him of his manners, though the coy smile on her lips betrayed that she didn’t mind him staring at all. He stepped forward to envelope her in a hug and greeted her with a kiss.

“Happy Birthday, love,” he wordlessly summoned a bouquet of her favourite red roses and presented it to her.

The smile she rewarded him with could have put the sun to shame, warming him far more deeply too. After a prolonged thank you kiss he finally ushered her inside and closed the door behind them. The lights sprang on as soon as they entered revealing a cosy sitting room. There was a broad loveseat in front of a lit fireplace surrounded by several low tables. A crystal vase was sitting on one of them filled with water already, a bucket with iced champagne and flutes on another and a substantial heap of wrapped parcels right in front.

“Oh Merlin, Theo, this really was not necessary,” she exclaimed half amazed half scandalised when her eyes fell on it.

Ah, women, deep down there they all were just the same. Always saying that presents were not necessary, but any man worth his money knew that it was not true. But well, appearances needed to be upheld of course, so he simply put his hand on the small of her back and steered her towards them.

“Maybe, but I liked buying them for you anyway,” he smirked smugly earning himself a half-hearted glare. He manoeuvred them onto the loveseat and poured out the drinks, while Hermione put her roses away.

“Now,” he gave her a flute and took the other one holding it up for a toast. “I would like to drink to your health and happiness, bright future and what not, but that would be too cliché,” she giggled softly making him smile. “You are my light and my darkness, my happiness and my sorrow, my love, my life and today on the day of your birth I’m going to drink to you.”

He took a sip and she followed suit a moment later, her eyes glinting wetly in the candlelight. He took the flutes and put them on the table before taking her in his arms. She was his. He knew what she needed and he would give it to her. Always.

“You are the sweetest boy on this bloody planet,” she whispered into his chest making him chuckle and kiss the crown of her head.

They spent the next half an hour making out and joking around, while opening the presents. Theodore was quite pleased to notice that she had not the slightest suspicion so far. Good. There was still one last present he had for her tonight, but that was planned for much later. On that thought, it was time to relocate to the bathroom.
It was an interesting occurrence that even after three weeks of a quite active sexual relationship they have never seen each other entirely naked. It had been always quick and fumbling out of fear of discovery, not to mention that cold, hard stone walls and floors did not necessarily invite you to undress completely. Tonight though he had every intention to remedy that.

Hermione’s breath hitched in pleasant surprise when they entered the candlelit room. That and the happy sparkle in her eyes was quite rewarding indeed, seeing as he had put a lot of time and thought into this one. The silver coloured tile walls were draped with deep red silk, rose petals and silvery candles were placed on the floor in intricate patterns and in the middle of it all was the tub filled with vanilla and apricot scented water, her favourite.

“Well, you are determined to press every button tonight, aren’t you?”

“Why?” he asked innocently and glided his hand down to her bum squeezing it lightly. “There are far better things to press here as far as I can see.”

“Are there now?” She smiled sultry and guided his other hand to join the first, while pressing her full length against his.

He bit back a moan feeling his half hard cock swell fully at the contact, never needing much to get it up for her any time she wished. And the little minx knew that well of course, not that he was complaining, but she had left him in quite a predicament during the school day more than once already.

They kissed slowly, sensually, drawing out the pleasure, while letting their hands wander, though soon enough this was no longer satisfactory. He wanted to feel the softness of her skin, to explore it and commit every inch to memory, in both texture and taste. His hands began pulling on the fastenings of her robes and hers followed suit. Not wearing much underneath they were out of their clothes and in the tub a couple of moments later. It was only waist-deep giving them ample opportunity to get an eyeful of everything, whilst still keeping up the pretence of bathing. Perfect!

Yes, she was perfect indeed! He had seen her breasts before, but having them in front of him completely uncovered was a different matter entirely. They weren’t exactly huge, but definitely bigger than average as far as he could judge, and had the form of ripe apples, just like her bum. She was womanly curvy, yet her stomach was flat and her hips quite narrow. And he loved it! Loved the fact that she was muggleborn! Pureblooded girls could seldom offer what she had coming usually in two varieties only, either lean and flat or broad and squat. Where Theodore was concerned though, even a healthy lithe like Ginny Weasley was not good enough. He wanted something soft and supple to touch, not a haggard twig like Pansy Parkinson.

His eyes returned to her face seeing an equally appreciative gaze coming his way. Well, this was good too. He pulled her closer and into a kiss. Skin on skin it was so much better! Her hands gliding over his back and arse were driving him insane. Merlin, he needed to come! He wanted this to be mainly for her tonight, but couldn’t think straight enough to pleasure her the way he had intended. Thankfully she seemed to understand him without words and her slender hand wrapped itself around his painfully throbbing erection, stroking it slowly.

Theodore threw his head back moaning with abandon and clinging to her forcefully. It took only a few more strokes to bring him off and he had to lock his knees, lest they gave away and took her down with him, since he had no intention to let go of her this soon. Movements still somewhat sluggish in the aftermath of his orgasm he cupped her face with both his hands and placed a light kiss on her lips.

“Thank you, my love.” It was a simple phrase of gratitude, yet loaded with so much meaning. Thank
you for understanding me, for your patience, gentleness and care, thank you for loving me despite my many flaws.

She smiled tightening her arms around him and he knew that she had understood. They did wash eventually, after he had made her come several times of course, and proceeded to the bedroom, not that they were going to sleep anytime soon.

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He smirked as far as he could with his tongue in her delicious womanhood and pinched her clit making her buckle and moan louder. Oh, how he loved this! The sounds she made and the taste of her pleasure were intoxicating. Theodore could honestly admit that he would be happy to go on like that for the rest of his life... well, if not for his blasted cock demanding attention yet again. He withdrew his tongue from her with reluctance and concentrated on sucking her clit harder, biting down slightly from time to time.

Hermione went completely wild under his ministrations and he had to hold her hips down harder or she would throw him of. A couple of moments later she began chanting his name in a high, keening voice, heralding her approaching orgasm. And yes, he loved this part too! Just a minute more and she flew apart screaming her release. After lapping up her juices he sat up watching her calm down. He didn’t know how late or early it was, but they definitely had been at it for hours. Their score was now sixteen to three in her favour, one more time and he would be done with her for tonight.

“Oh Merlin,” she moaned rubbing her sweaty face. “I don’t even want to know how sore I’m going to be in the morning.”

He kneaded her breasts chuckling. “Don’t worry, love, I’ll have potions ready as soon as you wake up.”

He pressed the creamy globes together and started thrusting into the gap between them, savouring the glorious friction.

An orgasm each and several cleaning charms later they lay pleasantly exhausted in each other’s arms. They were both half asleep already, but there was still one more item on his program to be carried out.

“How?”

“Hm?” came the sleepy response.

“Do you remember the incident on the train? I have researched it.”

She shifted on his chest and raised her head looking into his face, signalling that he had her full attention.

“As you know the loss of virginity accompanied by a specific ritual is utilised to form engagement or marriage bonds. In cases where the participants are compatible and their emotions running high a ritual is often not necessary.”

She nodded for him to continue.

“Well, I have found out that at least concerning engagement there have been cases, where the partners were so exceptionally compatible in body, mind and magic, that even the actual penetration was not necessary.”
Her eyes widened in shock. “Are you saying that we are engaged already?”

“It would seem so,” he smiled crookedly running his hand through the mass of her hair. “I would also mean that we won’t need a ritual to marry. The intercourse itself would be enough to form a very strong marriage bond.”

She blinked several times processing the information. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Well,” he drawled in an amused tone, “it’s not like I can marry anyone else now anyway.”

She scoffed indignantly and hit him on the arm as hard as she could.

“Alright, alright, I am asking you to marry me,” he conceded rubbing his abused appendage.

“That’s more like it,” she smirked smugly.

“There is a way to verify it,” he summoned a small wooden box into his hand and opened it. Inside was a simple, elegant gold band adorned with a sizable diamond. “This is a family engagement ring, take it and put it on. If it resizes to fit you, it will mean that it recognises you as a true bride to the House Nott, if not nothing will happen.”

She took the ring out unable to hide the slight trembling of her hands and slid it on the ring finger of her left hand. There was a flash of light and it resized itself to fit her snugly. He let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding and took her hand into both of his to kiss it.

“Happy Birthday, my love!”

Suddenly realising that he had planned this from the very beginning she put her arms on her hips scandalised. “Oh, you ruddy snake, you..!”

He grinned and silenced her with a kiss.
Harry and Hermione had a long talk following her eventful birthday and came to the conclusion that to keep the news of her engagement in the circle of the New Order only would be unrealistic in the long run. A witch of her standing was sure to receive offers soon and those needed to be declined properly or she would cause offence. The only thing they could try and do was to keep the identity of her intended to themselves. Furthermore, Theodore needed to be made aware of the existence of their organisation and either included into it or put under an Unbreakable Vow, not only for their safety, but also for his own. Thus, they arranged a meeting in the Room of Requirement the following evening to clear everything between the three of them as a family so to speak, before presenting it to the Order.

After formal congratulations they sat down to tea and biscuits and Harry decided to open the conversation without further delay.

“Well, I don’t know how much Hermione has told you already, but as a future member of this family there are things you need to know.”

Theodore nodded for him to continue quite interested in what he had to say.

“In response to the threat of Voldemort and Dumbledore’s many deficiencies I have started my own organisation, a third side in this conflict of sorts, the main purpose of which is to establish a grey zone between the already existing fronts. Our political agenda is first and foremost the extermination of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, secondly a reformation of the wizarding society, which is several centuries overdue to be honest, to make the rise of the next Dark Lord far more difficult than it currently is, and thirdly to offer a safety net to all those who’d rather stay out of this war entirely, with no strings attached.”

He paused to give him a moment to absorb it, calmly taking a sip of his tea and demonstrating at the same time that he was quite serious.

“As a future husband to a high ranking member you would be privy to important information and hence pose an unacceptable security risk. For that reason I must ask an Unbreakable Vow of you before we leave here tonight, Hermione and I for our part would feel much better to not have to obliviate you every time any of us slips up,” he smiled drily. “You are welcome to join if you wish, though it is of course not mandatory.”

Theodore looked him over calculatingly, sizing up his sincerity and considering his options. Agreeing to this meeting tonight he had never imagined they would talk about war and politics, much less something of this magnitude. Well, he should have learned by now that Harry Potter was not one to waste time on sentimental drivel he supposed. An opportunity to gain a lot of political weight such as this did not come one’s way often either and he knew he’d better take it as long as he could, since it was something the House Nott definitely could do with a bit more of.

“What exactly would be expected of me should I actually join?”

Hermione beamed next to him knowing his decision already. Harry smirked catching on and put his cup down.

“Well, to follow my direct orders for one, then to manage the tasks entrusted to you to the best of your abilities and of course to maintain discretion. We prefer to operate in shadows seeing as anything else would be pretty much suicidal at this point. But there is no denying that your abilities
as a fighter will be required sooner or later, we do offer professional training to our soldiers though.”

Theodore nodded his agreement and Hermione brought up the wooden box proceeding to explain the contract in detail. Harry had to admit that he was relieved. Having another man operating directly in the Slytherin ranks would unburden Snape a lot, as well as considerably diminish the risk of his discovery by the Dark Side.

After signing and sealing the contract Theodore looked over the names eagerly, any doubts he might have had disappeared immediately as soon as he saw Snape’s among them. And though few, the rest of them were quite impressive as well.

“Welcome to the New Order, Theodore Nott, I hereby offer you the position of the Slytherin Liaison. Your main function would be that of an advisor and informant on everything concerning the house Slytherin within the confines of this school, as well as in general. You will be working alongside Professor Snape, assisting him with fishing for new recruits and mentoring people in desperate need of help. Do you accept it?”

“I do.”

“Very well,” Harry smiled pleasantly. “Please remember that any help on the offer is with no compensation in mind. We do take gratitude, favours, loyalty, money and payment in kind of course, but only if they are offered freely.”

And there it was again, that strange look of admiration and fear mixed with quite a bit of disbelief this time. Harry really did not know what they all meant honestly, nothing for it though. He sighed and refilled his cup.

“Now with business concluded, I would like to know what you have in mind for the social circus this engagement is likely to turn into,” he addressed them both this time.

“Bear with it,” Hermione groaned, “or at least I will have to. I’m going to wear the ring openly after we have announced it in the circle of the New Order and simply not answer any questions.”

Theodore nodded rubbing circles on her back comfortingly. “It would be unwise to make a public announcement as long as we are still at school. Afterwards, we are going to marry immediately and concealing it would no longer be necessary,” they smiled at each other lovingly and Harry could not help feeling just this tiny bit of jealousy at their happiness. It was exactly what he had always wished for himself after all, though he pushed it away quickly enough. Speaking of jealousy...

“Ron is going to be trouble,” he warned them. “A lot of trouble as a matter of fact and I can only step in so much.”

He looked over to Theodore who nodded once, receiving the message. As long as he did not kill or dismember him permanently any means of retaliation were fine with Harry. Hermione followed the exchange annoyed.

“I can handle the likes of Ron myself just fine, thank you very much,” she insisted forcefully.

“Of course, love,” Theodore pecked her on the lips receiving a deadly glare in return.

Harry bit into his tongue and wisely decided not to comment.

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The rest of September flew by in an early established routine of classes, homework, private research
and study, as well as combat training with Severus. Harry had begun calling him by his first name in his head, since wanking to the name of Snape started to get awkward after a while. Their private meetings were leaving him incredibly sore every time and incredibly frustrated. Not with his progress though, rather with the sexual tension so thick that it was almost palpable between them.

Harry was well aware by now that Severus knew of his feelings for him and therefore very heartened by the fact that he was still alive and in one piece. To make it even better, he had the feeling that his advances would not be unwelcome, although as predicted Severus hadn’t made any of his own. Harry knew he would have to be the one to take the first step and he really, really wanted to, but was simply afraid.

*I mean, just look the facts in the face. Severus is quite a bit older and unquestionably experienced and you have only started on those books Madam Pomfrey had recommended. You are going to embarrass yourself to the bone.*

He sighed defeated and closed his eyes taking care of his morning erection in the stall of the boys’ showers, while the warm water cascaded down his shoulders. His own hand would have to do for now.

The first of October had brought the start of the long awaited sale, as the Daily Prophet had excitedly pronounced in that morning’s edition. Far more interesting however would have been the news of Mrs. Malfoy’s disappearance last night, without the slightest bit of trace he might add. How mysterious! He smirked into his teacup and looked over to Malfoy, who was folding a letter, most likely from his father announcing the very fact, with artfully feigned concern. He wasn’t going to inform him of her whereabouts for obvious reasons, but she would be safe and comfortable as long as she stayed put. The rest was really none of his business and he had told Malfoy so, though they would be able to communicate through letters anytime they wished.

He took another sip and let his gaze wander over the hall at leisure. The initial excitement, or uproar in some cases, over the materialisation of a quite old and expensive promise ring on Hermione’s finger a week ago seemed to have died down somewhat. Nonetheless, she was still constantly accosted in the common room, the Great Hall during the meals and even in the corridors between the classes, and by most unlikely people to boot. The New Order members were making sure to never let her out of sight for too long, since not all of them were friendly or simply curious.

Ron’s reaction had been particularly nasty and he could not help but cringe inside at the memory. The shouting match had been ugly enough, but when he had actually drawn his wand things got out of hand rather quickly. He had not managed to hit her with whatever it was thankfully, Hermione was too good for that, but judging by the colour of its residue absorbed by her shield it had been definitely not a first-year hex.

And Harry had lost it there and then. He had stayed out of it on Hermione’s insistence, sitting and watching the exchange with a put on calm, but to witness that had made him snap and his anger take control. He had shot out of his chair, pinned Ron to the ground and proceeded to pommel the hell out of him the muggle way. No one had interfered until McGonagall had arrived and dragged him off him. Gryffindor had lost a hundred points that evening and he had received detention for a fortnight, Ron had as well and a Howler from Mrs. Weasley the next morning. Apparently, Ginny had wasted no time in informing her. Harry’s ears had rung for hours afterwards, though it hadn’t diminished the sense of satisfaction deep inside in the least.

Ron had gone out of his way to avoid them since then, which was just fine with them to be honest. Theodore’s wrath had not come upon him yet, but Harry knew it was on its way, and when it did arrive it was not going to be pleasant.
Dumbledore with his never ending meddling complex had inquired after Hermione’s fiancé of course, under the pretence of cautioning her on making rash decisions and the perils of a marriage to a man of unknown character and intentions. She however had reassured him that the man in question was indeed honourable and his intentions quite clear, since he had signed a betrothal contract and given her a ring, she couldn’t tell him his name though, since he had insisted on discretion. That of course did not sit well with the old man, but unable to get it out of her he had let it go for now.

Harry smirked again covering it with another sip and looked over to the head table. The Headmaster seemed to be in a bad mood again, as he was almost constantly nowadays. He was hiding it masterfully, though Harry had learned to read him well enough to be able to tell. Good! Almost anything upsetting him was most satisfactory after all.

On Friday the 25th of October Theodore had followed Hermione into adulthood and shocked his teachers and the entire Slytherin house with an abrupt change in his behaviour. He, Harry and Severus had decided that he’d better reveal his true face to the world in order to set an example and draw in his likeminded peers. Harry could tell he had enjoyed himself a bit too much though.

They had thrown a surprise party for him in the Room of Requirement that evening. Theodore had gone through the procedure of blowing out candles and opening presents with an expression of an almost shock on his face, Harry could commiserate only too well. They had needed some time to adjust to suddenly having friends in his first year here as well. Anyway, it had been great! They all needed a Hangover Cure Potion this morning, since he and Neville had procured hard stuff in addition to butterbeer this time, but it was definitely worth it.

They had indulged in a round of poker, where Luna had predictably stripped them all to the bone. Harry was very glad they had played for chips and not for real money then. Afterwards, they had been drunk enough to move onto the truth or dare, where everyone had gathered enough blackmail material to last for years. His personal most embarrassing moment had been the revelation of his preferences and his current love interest. Strangely enough no one, not even Theodore and Neville, had been too surprised.

Was I that obvious? Apparently, Harry smiled walking down the road to Hogsmeade next to his friends. It was the last weekend before Halloween and therefore their usual first visit to the village. He had a lot to do today, buying new glasses for one, stocking up on everything and maybe even making an early start on the Christmas presents for everyone. His list had grown considerably after all, even with one friend down now.

Theodore had arranged to leave school until Sunday night to take his Apparition test and sort out his inheritance with the goblins. What only the New Order knew however, was that he would take Hermione with him and they would have to cover for her until then.

Reaching the main street, the first thing to catch Harry’s eye was the quite noticeable Auror presence, not to mention the more than just a few Order of the Phoenix members milling around. Figures! After making a visit to the optician and choosing, or rather having chosen, a quite smart looking pair of glasses in a rectangular, metallic gray frame and putting them on immediately, Harry and the others had decided to split up to do their own shopping, agreeing to meet afterwards in the Three Broomsticks for lunch. Hermione of course had discreetly disappeared by now.

He and Ginny were strolling around the shops with no particular goal in mind, looking at this and that, with their purses getting lighter and the number of shrunken packages in their robes greater, not finding anything that could possibly do as a present for Severus though. Ginny had suggested a book or rare potions ingredients, though he was unable to tell if it had been just a joke or not. In any case it
was too ordinary for his tastes, seeing as he’d rather give him something more personal, the trouble was that he did not know the man that well yet.

Giving up for now Harry leaned himself against the counter in a dusty antiques shop, waiting for Ginny to finish sorting through some caskets and looked out of the window. There seemed to be quite a crowd gathering outside of LeNior, an expensive restaurant students usually did not visit for a meal on their Hogsmeade weekends, reporters mostly, and ordinary passersby as well. Unable to suppress his curiosity he called Ginny over and they ventured outside to investigate. As far as he could see, a small podium had been erected next to the entrance, occupied by a delegation of Aurors and other Ministry personnel. They went around the main cluster and placed themselves on the far left, close to the building wall, but also closer to the podium itself than most people around them.

The reason for this gathering was revealed as soon as the new Minister of Magic stepped out of the open doors and onto the podium to give a speech on the current state of politics. Harry had to admit that Scrimgeour did cut an impressive figure, radiating strength and confidence despite the noticeable limp, his assertiveness though was yet to be determined.

After the surprisingly short address the reporters were allowed to ask questions. Following the exchange for a while Harry got bored rather quickly and was about to turn away with lunch in mind when he was spotted.

“Mr. Potter... Mr. Potter...” He was temporarily dazzled by the flashes of light going off at once, did manage to put on an indulging smile though. Thank Merlin he had replaced his glasses already!

The reporters were shouting all sorts of questions in his direction drowning each other out, until Scrimgeour called them to order and invited Harry onto the stage. Jumping on this excellent opportunity he cast a Sonorus on himself and took Scrimgeour’s hand.

“Thank you, Minister,” he smiled politely adopting a formal tone. “May I congratulate you on the successful ascension of your office. I do sincerely hope you won’t repeat your predecessor’s mistakes.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes narrowed slightly, though his own polite smile stayed on for the cameras to capture when he gave a brief bow of acknowledgement.

**Good! A sharp knife for a change.**

Harry turned to face the reporters with an expectant smile. Their hands shot in the air immediately, clamouring for his attention, so he pointed at a balding, middle-aged wizard right in front of him.

“Walter Wedgewick, Mr. Potter, The London Local. There have been quite a few disagreements between the Ministry and yourself in the past, are you going to support the government’s current course despite that or choose to stay out of politics entirely?”

“As the Heir of House Potter and Black I can’t afford to stay out of politics entirely, Mr. Wedgewick, even if it would make my life a lot easier then,” Harry snorted in amusement gathering a couple of sniggers here and there. “But to answer your question, the current government is still in the making, so we are going to wait and see. At the moment though, I have no reason to doubt the Minister’s ability to fulfil his duty to the best of his ability.”

He bowed in Scrimgeour’s direction receiving one in return and called upon a young witch to the far right.

“Beth Belby, The Daily Prophet, Mr. Potter. What is your response to the heavy wave of attacks
three months ago?”

Harry straightened turning serious again. “It was the first since Voldemort’s…” the gathering flinched in unison here “…return, but I sincerely doubt that it will be the last. Only homes of the muggleborn have been attacked so far, but it won’t be long until he gathers enough confidence to attack the full wizarding ones. I urge you all therefore to fortify your homes as strongly as possible and take every safety measure available to secure the wellbeing of your friends and family.”

“But what are you going to do?” someone shouted from the crowd triggering a sea of agitated murmurs.

“What I am going to do?” Harry raised an eyebrow at them. “The question is rather what you are going to do.”

His gaze wandered over the gathered people seeing only confusion in their faces.

“Ah, I see,” he sneered down on them in his best imitation of Snape. “I am the muggle raised here, but it looks like you are the ones in need of a reminder.”

He pulled his wand and held it over his head for everyone to see.

“My fellow witches and wizards, must I remind you that every single one of you is holding a deadly weapon in your hand? So, why don’t you use it to defend yourselves from those who cause you harm?”

He glared at them in derision meeting their widened eyes, before pocketing his wand again.

“What are you waiting for?” he bellowed making them flinch and shrink back, as if scorched by the fire burning in his eyes unbeknownst to him. “Are you waiting for the Aurors to save you? Must I remind you that the Department of Law Enforcement is pitifully understaffed and its budget scandalously low? The Aurors don’t have the manpower to cover every single call, much less on time.”

“Or are you waiting for me to save you?” he continued after a moment of silence. “What am I, some almighty god to answer your very prayers? Must I remind you that wars are not fought nor won by just one man?”

“What I am going to do?” he sneered at them again. “I thought I made it blatantly clear what I am going to do. I’m going to fight! The question is then, are you going to fight as well, or are you going to stand by and watch your wives and daughters raped and your husbands and sons broken and killed before your very eyes?”
Meeting the Minister

Harry watched the gathered witches and wizards, who stared up at him in shocked silence, not sure if he might have made a mistake in saying that. But for Merlin’s sake, it had been burning on the tip of his tongue for quite a while! He just couldn’t help himself.

“Of course Harrykins, I’m gonna fight for my own posterior’s sake, what else?” came Seamus’ timely response from somewhere to his left.

He grinned and bowed in that direction. There were times where he could really kiss the Irishman. “Thank you, Seamus. Well, here we have at least one man ready to fight for his skin, there’s hope for the wizarding world yet.”

With that the tension was broken and an occasional snigger could be heard, though judging from their faces his little speech must have left quite an impact. No further questions were coming from the reporters’ side, so Harry decided he’d better clear off before they had gathered their wits again and turned away cancelling the Sonorus.

“Mr. Potter.”

He was already down the steps and had to look up to meet Scrimgeour’s calculating eyes.

“Would you like to join me for lunch?”

“Of course, Minister,” he smirked mischievously at the thought that Dumbledore would most certainly not like that, “it would be a pleasure.”

He could not help but think while following Scrimgeour into the restaurant that there were a lot of things he wanted to discuss with this man, which the Headmaster would not like to hear either. What he definitely did appreciate about the new Minister so far was that he, unlike Fudge, knew to keep his hands to himself.

They were led into a private room by the overzealous owner, who looked like he could not believe his luck at hosting such illustrious guests, and sat down at a table set for two already. The Minister’s guard took position outside the door leaving them alone. Harry ordered pumpkin juice, French onion soup and chicken salad sandwiches from his plate, receiving them immediately. They ate for a while in silence sizing each other up. Scrimgeour as the elder took it upon himself to initiate conversation.

“I must admit, Mr. Potter, that you have quite a talent at getting to people.”

“Taking a club and hitting them over the head you mean?” Harry replied with a smirk. “Unfortunately, I have had the experience that with the common witch and wizard this is the only way that works.”

“Indeed,” Scrimgeour smiled briefly before putting on a neutral expression. “We are facing troubled times, Mr. Potter, and the wizarding public is in much need of reassurance that the Ministry is doing everything in our power to maintain safety and stability. You as a widely recognised celebrity, not to mention a role model and carrier of hope to so many, have the power to do so. I would even go so far as to declare it your duty as an outstanding citizen.”

Harry stared at him in disbelief, before throwing his head back and roaring in laughter. The nerve of the man! Honestly! Calming down somewhat, he wiped off the tears in the corners of his eyes, still giggling from time to time. Then, took a deep breath and raised his Occlumency shields somewhat to
be able to assume an appropriate tone.

“Are you offering me the position of a poster boy, Minister? I must advise you not to insult me,” he sneered with a hint of steel in his eyes, then leaned back smirking slyly. “Besides, you would have to line up behind Dumbledore and his precious Order I fear.”

Whatever Scrimgeour had expected, that was definitely not it, which unsettled him quite noticeably. He had made it Head Auror and Minister for a reason though, and gathered himself rather quickly, rethinking his attitude and tactics. Harry could almost see the cogs turning behind his eyes. They both could offer a lot to the other, if they came to an agreement today and they both knew it well. Harry bit into another delicious sandwich.

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Theodore opened yet another set of doors and launched into the presentation of yet another impressive room, only too happy to show off his house to his wife to be. The manor itself seemed to be happy as well. Although, he couldn’t decide if it was actually the house or the house-elves, whose excitement he could feel through the wards. He couldn’t blame either to be honest. A new mistress always meant renovation and babies as well, which would be the continuation of the line to the one, and more humans to take care of to the other.

He had finished all of his business in the morning and had met up with Hermione in muggle London, before apparating them both to the gates of Nott manor. He had keyed her into the wards and given her a short overview of the grounds. Then, he led her into the house to introduce her to the house-elves. Missy was beyond delighted he could tell and the rest of them not far behind. They took an early lunch and went on a tour of the house itself. Hermione was giving the impression to like it well enough, despite the bad memories, the library most of all of course, though he could see that she had begun to make mental plans for redecoration already.

The manor was of a rather moderate size and they had managed to see most of it within an hour coming to the master bedroom at last. Being the ever Slytherin he had left that room out until the end.

A good while later they lay sweaty and somewhat sated on the satin sheets, caressing and kissing each other in the afterglow of their first round. Suddenly, Hermione smirked and pulled away sitting up and summoning a nicely wrapped package into her hand.

“I have decided to take a leaf out of your book and save the best present for the very last moment.”

Theodore tore into it with the eagerness of small child on Christmas morning, finding two vials of a grey potion. He raised an eyebrow in question to receive the same gesture, only of a challenging variety, in response. Very well, he smirked in amusement, *it should not be too hard to find out then.* He held the vials into the light noticing that one of them had a reddish tint to it, while the other was of a consistent steel grey colour. *Hm, interesting!* He opened the plain one and took a careful sniff, then froze in shock recognising it immediately. Contraceptive Potion, male and female one obviously.

He swallowed heavily, not quite daring to breathe, lest he wake up from this wonderful dream and raised his head to meet Hermione’s loving eyes and smile. His brain commanded him to start supplying it with oxygen again or it would give out, so he took a shuddering breath, then another one feeling quite undone.

“Happy Birthday, my love!” Hermione leaned in to kiss him, before prying the reddish potion out of his fist and swallowing it.
Desperately trying to maintain a firm grip on his sanity he followed suit with his own, before crushing their mouths and bodies together. He had brought her to a second orgasm in record time in his impatience to finally be able to fulfil the dream that had haunted him countless times through his years at Hogwarts. A dream as bitter as it had been sweet, and now with it becoming reality, it was almost too much to bear.

Trembling with excitement he nestled himself between her legs, took his rock-hard cock into his hand and slowly inserted the tip. *Oh Merlin! Oh Merlin! Oh Merlin...*

Hermione was gasping and clenching the sheets underneath her frantically, while Theodore pushed against the slight resistance of her hymen. Breathing heavily he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers, suddenly aware of the magic lurking just under the surface of their skin, waiting teasingly, daring them to go through with it all the way.

Unable to resist the challenge he wrapped his arms around her and thrust home.

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Coming to a decision Scrimgeour smiled wryly. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Potter, just a slight misunderstanding on my part.”

Harry inclined his head in acceptance and took a sip of his juice waiting for him to continue.

“Nonetheless, the wizarding world is all but at war this very moment and an alliance between us would be of an immeasurable benefit to our side.”

“I can only agree to that, Minister. May I inquire after your plans for the near future?”

Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow taken aback by his forwardness, but answered anyway.

“First and foremost to bring my own house in order. The Ministry is crawling with Death Eaters, incompetence and corruption, restricting my political movements considerably. This needs to change as soon as possible.”

“In that case I can tell you that you’d be investing your time and energy wrongly,” Harry pursed his lips in amusement. “Dumbledore has made quite a progress in that direction already and I in your place would simply leave him to it. However, the Department of Mysteries might cause a problem, since Voldemort’s agents are sitting too deep there for Dumbledore’s men to reach. You as the Minister would have no such difficulties of course.”

Scrimgeour was regarding him through narrowed eyes, as if trying to figure out how he came by that information, though Harry could see that he was undoubtedly impressed.

“And what would you suggest for me to concentrate on instead, Mr. Potter?” he asked feigning offence.

“To start gathering allies to secure your position,” Harry answered unperturbed. “The state of the Department of International Magical Cooperation is most pitiful, wouldn’t you agree? And not only humans, you have left a deranged bitch with an agenda in charge of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for a good decade, and you are seriously wondering why the so called Dark Creatures are joining Voldemort en masse?”

The man before him seemed to be torn between amusement and indignation, until he had registered the hardness in Harry’s eyes.
“Let me tell you one thing, Minister, at the very first gathering of the Wizengamot after my turning of age one of my first actions is going to be the termination of every single law and regulation brought through by one Dolores Umbridge.” He smirked suddenly. “You could of course take the initiative and propose it yourself already. In doing so you would send a clear message to our nonhuman brethren, which would gain you their attention and maybe even an open ear.”

Scrimgeour was staring at him like he had lost his mind. “Do you actually have any idea how great an outcry any such proposition would cause? To do such a thing would be equivalent to a political death!”

“I can assure you that the resistance is going to be far smaller than you can possibly imagine. Have you forgotten that Dumbledore has been preparing the ground for it for decades? You would simply beat him to it. And since Voldemort’s supporters happen to come from the conservative section mostly, many of them have been removed already or will be in the next couple of months. An opportunity such as this could secure you a place among the truly great in the history books to come. The question is then, do you have the courage to grasp it, or will you to leave it to Dumbledore? Or to me, for that matter.”

They sat for a while in silence. Harry gave the Minister some time to think it over in peace.

“Even if the resistance within the Ministry is going to be manageable, what about the public opinion? Surely, they won’t welcome it with open arms?”

“Ah, Minister,” Harry smiled knowingly, “this is exactly the mistake your predecessor has made you know, to allow the public opinion to dictate his actions and even thoughts. Trouble is though that the public opinion is all but fickle, and so were his actions and mental facility.” His face hardened. “You are the Minister, you should dictate the public opinion, not the other way around!” Relaxing somewhat he added slyly, “but if it starts to get out of hand, just throw a fundraiser and send me an invitation. I do have a talent at getting to people after all.”

“You are a dangerous man, Mr. Potter,” Scrimgeour commented with a smirk of his own.

“Thank you, Minister, you are not bad yourself. But pleasantries aside, if we are to maintain this alliance we would need a secure way of communication.”

“Of course, Mr. Potter, I will arrange for it.”

“Very well, concerning the Department of Law Enforcement, its budget is scandalously low,” Harry looked at him pointedly causing a grimace. “However, I would be amenable to make a generous donation in exchange for certain privileges.”

“Such as,” Scrimgeour probed cautiously.

“A premature Apparation License for one, with my list of enemies I’d need any way of escape available you understand I’m sure. Thinking along those lines, an emergency Portkey won’t hurt either.”

Scrimgeour nodded once.

“Secondly, I want absolute control over my own post. I’m well aware that the Ministry has arranged for its scanning and selection with the Owl Post Office in the absence of other magical guardians and I’m grateful for it. However, I do consider myself mature and capable enough by now to take it over.”

Scrimgeour nodded again.
“Excellent,” Harry smiled pleasantly and rose offering the Minister his hand. “Thank you for the lunch, Minister. It was a pleasure to have made your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Mr. Potter, we will stay in contact,” Scrimgeour shook it smiling in return and saw him out.

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Hermione was still awake despite her tiredness, lying and watching the sunset through the unveiled window with her husband spooned behind her, breathing peacefully into the crook of her neck. Mrs. Nott, she smiled again trying to get used to the thought in her mind. It would take some time she supposed, though she couldn’t help feeling happy every time it appeared before her inner eye.

It had been a rather spontaneous decision she had to admit, the original plan being that of a marriage after their graduation. But thinking about it for a while, she had come to the conclusion that waiting might not be the best course of action after all. With war being what it was, her a muggleborn and Theo a blood-traitor, there was no guarantee either or both of them would come out of it alive.

She had learned her lesson well when her parents were murdered. Hermione had believed they would always have time to reconcile with each other later, after she had left school or when the war was over. She had promised herself to take some time for them to get to know each other again, to introduce them to the wonders of magic in ways she hadn’t been allowed to before. In just one night that all had been taken from her and to make it worse, she hadn’t been able to prevent it in any way.

*So much for later*, she sighed tightening her hold on Theodore’s hand. They had to live their lives now, since a later might very well never come. Putting her mind to rest she finally drifted into sleep.

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Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna had made it back to the castle right on time for dinner. Dodging the lingering reporters in order to continue their shopping had made them quite hungry, despite the hearty lunch. The Great Hall broke out into hushed whispers at their entrance, which Harry supposed he should have expected. News travelled fast here after all and his little show must have left quite an impression. In fact, it had been recorded and broadcasted on the WWN almost hourly, as Neville had informed him after their meeting up in the Three Broomsticks.

Ignoring the attention they sat down at their respective house tables and dug in. Seamus and Dean leaned over to congratulate him on his oratory skills. ‘Nice speech, Harry, sensitive and subtle.’

*Well, it did work, didn’t it?* He sighed heavily and continued to cut his meat.

The Evening Special Edition of the Prophet arrived sometime during desserts. And surprise, surprise... a photograph of him with his wand in the air was plastered all over the front page. Resigned to his fate he unrolled his own copy and had to do a double take.

The young man in the picture was by no means tall, though his poise and bearing made him seem larger than life. The broadness of his shoulders and the pronounced cheekbones and jawline were proclaiming him no longer a boy, which also made him quite attractive. The most prominent feature was however his eyes, burning with power and passion beyond anything Harry had ever encountered in himself. He could honestly believe that young man to be capable of anything.

*Is that really me? Is that what people see when they look at me?*

And for the first time he could actually understand why Severus, Draco and even Theodore were giving him *those* looks. He was powerful, he was frightening and he was most certainly impressive,
a Lord and Master to bow to without losing face. It was what he had set out to become, was it not? Then why was he suddenly so afraid?
Halloween

Harry had been quite surprised when Hermione had informed him about the new development in her and Theodore’s relationship upon their return on Sunday night, though he of all people could very well understand why they had decided not to wait. He even supposed he’d better follow their example and get his head out of his arse and the aforementioned body part into Severus’ bed sometime soon. Trouble was however, that the last remnants of Harry the Everyone’s Personal Doormat had finally chosen to rear their ugly, messy-haired head and throw him into a bit of an identity crisis.

Ever since he had failed to recognise himself in that photograph in the Daily Prophet, he had a hard time reconciling the Harry he knew with the Harry others, both friends and strangers, saw. It had forced him to seriously doubt if he actually knew himself as well as he had previously believed, not to mention to consider whether he liked this new Harry he had obviously become or not. Fortunately for him Luna had sensed his inner turmoil and dragged him off to Fluffy’s chamber for some talk.

“How is it that you fear so much?”

Harry couldn’t help but smile, never the one to bother with preambles, wasn’t she? And he loved her for it, no matter how hard it was to face the truth, or himself in this particular case. He took some time to ponder the question.

“To lose myself in other people’s expectations... again,” he sighed and rubbed his face. “I don’t recognise myself anymore, Luna, and I simply can’t decide if this image I’m projecting is truly me or just another mask I’ve put on in order to please people around me.”

“You’ve become aware of the power you hold and are now afraid of it,” Luna concluded just like that startling him a lot. He had not looked at it that way.

He was about to open his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “Power is nothing to be afraid of, Harry, since it is the way you use it, which determines your true self. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort knew that well when choosing their respective path. You can decide to either embrace it and choose your own, or to refuse it and follow the path laid down to your feet by others.”

With that she left him to his whirling thoughts. Harry wanted to call after her that it was not true, that it wasn’t that simple, but deep inside he knew she was right. He sighed and sat back down on his by now familiar windowsill. This was yet another remnant of the Dursley legacy he supposed. Being strong, skilful and intelligent had meant only pain under that roof, unless it was used to carry out orders and hard manual work.

He frowned coming to a sudden realisation. If he refused the power he had now, he would be playing exactly into Dumbledore’s hands, since to fear any power of his own must have been one of the things the Headmaster had wanted to be instilled into him from childhood. If anything, he could simply not allow that to happen.

Coming to a decision Harry secured the room once again and conjured a full body length mirror. Placing it in front of him he looked at his reflection carefully, tracing the lines of his face with his fingers to ensure that his eyes did not betray him. He could remember quite clearly what he had looked like once and it was definitely not what he saw now. The small, frail, insecure child was all but gone, why was he still trying to hold onto it? The boy he had known was weak and easy to sway by opinions of people whom he believed to be more important than him. The Harry looking back at him was anything but. He was a young man, his body was that of a young man, his thoughts were
those of a young man, then why did he not see himself as such? The eyes in the mirror hardened.

*We had this discussion once already, have we not? I am what I am and there is nothing wrong with it!* He smirked suddenly. *Besides, Severus would not want a child, now would he?*

The young Lord closed his eyes imagining the Defence Master’s lips on his own, their hands roaming each other’s body sensually, the feeling of bare skin on skin, of hard erections rubbing against each other. He opened his trousers and caressed his rapidly hardening member.

*A child does not have such dreams... he moaned softly ...a child is unable to feel this sort of pleasure.*

After reaching his orgasm Harry opened his eyes and took in his flushed face and pleasantly exhausted posture. He could not help wondering what Severus would look like after he had come.

*Well, only one way to find out,* he and his reflection smirked alike.

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The Halloween Feast had been as magnificent as ever, Harry though was still glad to be finally able to leave. He and Severus had an appointment for combat training right afterwards and would continue with a strategy meeting in his quarters subsequently. Not that they were going to accomplish anything tonight if all went well, Harry smiled to himself before disappearing under his invisibility cloak.

The training had turned out to be a disaster. He was nervous and distracted driving Severus up the pole, and not the way he would have liked of course. They were practicing combined attacks, where Severus would throw in a Legilimens between the usual hexes and curses to hone his overall awareness. Needless to say that by the end of it he was sore all over and had a headache the size of Mount Everest. Taking a pity on him Severus had patched him up somewhat with potions and healing spells, before taking them to his rooms.

Harry was very glad for it to be sure, unfortunately there was no potion that could have given him a bit more confidence than he currently felt, or maybe there was, but he hadn’t thought to look into it beforehand. It didn’t matter anyway he supposed, his rapidly increasing desire for the man walking in front of him would be as good a courage booster as any.

By the time they had arrived at Severus’ door Harry was painfully excited and very grateful for his cloak, since he was walking somewhat strangely. Severus let him in and secured the entrance and the Floo, before inviting him to sit.

*Well,* Harry smirked hanging up his invisibility cloak and outer robes next to the Defence Masters’, *he hasn’t specified where,* has he?

He took a deep breath, went over to the couch and straddled Severus lap putting his arms around his neck and pressing his lips to the man’s, who by now had stiffened in shock.

Severus had been slightly concerned about Harry’s lack of focus this evening, although the soft, warm lips on his own and the hardness poking into his lower stomach were explanation enough to put his mind to rest. At least until it occurred to him that he was about to have his first ever sexual experience and started panicking behind his hastily raised shields.

*Okay! Calm down! Relax! You wanted this, did you not? Just do it then! You are as ready as you are ever going to be!*
He forced himself to relax and put his arms around Harry’s waist, tentatively returning the kiss and opening his mouth to the probing tongue.

Harry could have crowed in triumph when he felt Severus respond favourably, but refrained in order to deepen the kiss using the technique he had practiced, which the book had said was furthering your partner’s arousal. And not only your partner’s obviously, since he was dangerously close to spraying his load when they finally parted for much needed air. Severus tasted absolutely intoxicating, both bitter and sweet, of black tea and pumpkin pastry he had likely eaten this evening. Add to it his slightly flushed face, the half-lidded eyes and kiss-swollen lips and Harry could honestly eat him alive.

To give his body time to calm down a bit he began tracing the outline of Severus’ jaw and neck with the tips of his fingers, watching the man all but melt into his touch with a soft moan. It was when he suddenly realised that they have yet to make some sort of verbal acknowledgement of what exactly they were doing and how far they were ready to go tonight. And secondly, Severus was in fact submissive.

Not that he was complaining, but Harry could honestly say that he had not expected that, not from Severus Snape, the most domineering and forbidding wizard of his acquaintance. He found that he didn’t mind either way, it would have been nice though to have Severus take lead their first time. He blinked. It simply made no sense, unless he didn’t know this man at all, which was probably the case, if he was honest with himself. He would have to remedy that in the long run, since he didn’t want this, whatever it was between them, to be just a fuck. Trouble was however that he couldn’t be sure if it was what Severus wanted as well.

Gathering his courage he pressed his cheek to the man’s and whispered a seemingly simple question into his ear. “What’s your favourite colour?”

Severus’ eyes flew open immediately getting the implication, but not quite able to believe it. Feeling the urge to confirm it he coaxed the vibrant emerald eyes to meet his, searching them insistently. Harry smiled and gave in, lowering his shields to let him enter his mind, secretly enjoying the intimacy of their joining. Unlike during their futile Occlumency lessons, Severus entered slowly, his presence tentative and rather comforting. Forgetting that he could hear his immediate thoughts Harry pondered rather lengthily, if the man’s cock would feel the same when entering him, registering only a moment later that the presence in his mind had frozen in shock.

Harry’s face was burning in embarrassment he knew without doubt, even though he couldn’t feel it, concentrating on his inner world and the tumultuous feelings Severus was trying hard and failing to hide from him. It was when he noticed something or rather someone else relentlessly forcing his way into the landscape of his mind. A familiar someone, though most certainly unwelcome.

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Harry ignored the excruciating pain shooting through his body and mind and threw his whole being into blocking Voldemort and trying to push him out. Unfortunately, his mind’s defences were weakened due to the training session less than an hour ago. Furthermore, he had them all lowered when the attack came and raising them now with Voldemort in his mind already would be unwise, since it would block his exit.

Where the hell has he come from all of a sudden?

And then he saw it, the link between their minds anchored to the curse scar. It seemed to be an angrily wreathing bridge consisting of black strands of dark magic, which looked almost alive. Voldemort got a firm hold of him and began retreating into his own mind, dragging him along. A
moment later they both opened their eyes to take in the horrifying view, or at least horrifying to
Harry, Voldemort was cackling in mad glee.

“Ah, Harry Potter, how considerate of you to relax your shields this very moment to join my little
party, I did throw it in your and your late parents’ honour after all. I hope you will find it to your
liking,” he made a sweeping motion with his arm turning slowly on the spot to give Harry a better
look around.

They were standing on the main square of a muggle looking village; the houses around them were
burning like torches in the night, illuminating the scenes of death, rape and torture; the men and
women still alive were screaming in terror and pain while the Death Eaters laughed and hollered
drunkenly, whether from alcohol or bloodshed did not seem to matter.

“Lively, isn’t it?”

He crossed the square splattered with glistening blood and passing a destroyed monument continued
down the main street until the very end, where he stopped before an old, rundown cottage with a
caved in roof, the only house in the village not burning it seemed.

“Quite an interesting shrine the Ministry has made out of it, don’t you think?” he laughed and blasted
the ruins away leaving nothing but a crater between two burning houses. Harry came out of his
stupor and started pushing against the barriers holding him captive, having a good idea by now
where they were. A pain worthy of the Cruciatus Curse shot through him hindering his progress.

“Now, now, Harry,” Voldemort tut-tutted at him smirking smugly. “You are not leaving already, are
you? It would be rude.”

Harry snarled angrily and slammed into the shields causing a crack, which not only wiped that smirk
off his face, but also made Voldemort stagger. The triumph was short-lived though, since the pain
had increased to the point of being almost unbearable, slowly draining him of strength.

Suddenly, someone struck the shields from the outside bringing them down in an instant. Harry
almost sobbed in relief recognising Severus immediately. Voldemort’s scream of rage told them that
he did as well, so they wasted no time fleeing back to Harry’s mind, before he had regained his
strength.

Occlumency shields up and ready Harry watched the bridge in trepidation. It needed to go, that much
was for sure. Reading his thoughts Severus suggested that they combine their magic to try and break
it. The black strands shuddered under their assault, tearing and unravelling bit by reluctant bit.
Heartened by their success they pushed harder stretching the last remnants like elastic, until they tore
off with a resounding snap and dissolved into nothingness. Harry’s shields had protected them from
the magical backlash and they both smirked at the thought of Voldemort’s probably still being down,
before finally returning to the physical world.

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Harry squeezed his eyes shut and bit back a scream. Merlin he was hurting! His head was pounding
and his very nerves seemed to be on fire! Severus shifted under him and rolled them over and away
from the overturned couch, before taking out his potions bag and forcing a vial of heavy duty pain
reliever down Harry’s throat. The effect was immediate, the pain was lifted like a blanket leaving
him breathing heavily in its remembrance. He opened his eyes squinting at Severus’ blurry form,
casting what looked like healing spells at him and raised his hand slightly to summon his glasses.

After Severus was done Harry sat up carefully, feeling a bit sore despite the potion and looked up to
be met with a pair of resigned black eyes. He knew what Severus was thinking, he knew what had happened to Karkaroff after all. It was only a matter of time until the Mark started burning, driving him slowly into insanity and death. But if he thought that he would allow that to happen, he could think again!

He moved over and grabbed Severus’ left arm all but ripping the sleeve away in ruthless determination. Voldemort had taken away almost everyone he cared about and he could only watch helplessly at the time, but not anymore! He was no longer the stupid, weak little boy he once had been. This man was his! He wanted him! He wanted all of him, and all of him he would get!

Harry placed his hands on either side of the black tattoo, not caring that he was gripping Severus’ arm strongly enough to leave bruises later, and stretched out his magical senses to explore its structure, ignoring the repulsively evil feel of it. Sifting through the many layers of magic in quick succession he had finally found the link connecting it to Voldemort and struck at it with all the might his righteous wrath could muster, cutting it neatly through, as if it were a mere straw.

Severus’ scream tore the air when the Mark literally burst out of his arm spraying them both with blood. Harry spluttered in disgust while fumbling for his wand to get all the sticky wetness off his face, before turning his attention to the mangled mess that was Severus’ forearm. Surprisingly enough it could be healed without even leaving a scar.

He watched the man caressing his Mark-free skin with a look of undisguised wonder and disbelief on his face, and could not help but feel happy for him. He could well imagine how much he must have hated that symbol of absolute dependence and how much he must have despised himself for ever taking it willingly, not to mention how hopeless he must have been to ever get rid of it. He sighed and smiled sheepishly when he suddenly remembered what he had in mind when coming here this evening.

*Well, that will have to wait for another time I suppose. Severus is not going anywhere now, if I have a say in it.*

In addition to no longer being in the mood he was tired and Severus must be too. He got up swaying slightly and tugged at the man’s arm to bring his attention back to himself.

“Can I stay with you tonight? I don’t think I would make it all the way back to the Gryffindor tower at the moment.”

“Of course,” Severus cleared his throat and looked away colouring a bit, obviously suddenly remembering their earlier activities as well. He rose and showed him into his bedroom. “The bathroom is through here. I will ask Winky to fetch you your sponge bag and some clean clothes.”
Severus woke up to the feeling of something shifting against him, something heavy and warm. His wand sprang into his hand immediately and he turned to investigate the source with a curse on the tip of his tongue, only to be met with the sight of a sleeping Harry Potter pressed against his back. He frowned wondering for a moment what in Merlin's name he was doing in his bed, until the last night's events finally emerged from the depths of his sleepy mind.

Hastily, he drew back the sleeve of his nightshirt to reveal his unmarked forearm and sighed in relief. It hadn't been just a dream after all, he was most truly no longer a Death Eater. A beaming smile he was very glad no one could see split his face in two, making him almost wince when his facial muscles stretched into a hitherto unknown position. No more bowing to megalomaniac madmen, no more Crucio for mere existence, unless Harry turned grumpy with old age. Life was good! He looked down at his Master lying next to him with fondness. And judging by what had happened before the Dark Lord's attack, it was going to get only better!

He closed his eyes unable to suppress the pleasant shiver going down his spine at the recollection of those wonderful moments, not noticing the pair of emerald ones watching him. Thus, he nearly jumped ten feet into the air when a hand settled itself on his half-hardened manhood rubbing it slowly. He was only glad that he did not scream, he would have never lived it down otherwise. He was about to send a scathing glare at the green eyed monster chuckling at him, when he was pinned to the bed and kissed into oblivion. He decided then that it was a good enough compensation for his injured pride and kissed Harry back just as enthusiastically.

"I believe we have an unfinished business, Professor," Harry breathed into his ear, his voice seductively low.

"Is that so, Mr. Potter?" he tried for aloof, but was distracted by a talented mouth nibbling and sucking on his neck.

*Oh Merlin, where the hell has he learned that? On second thought, I don't want to know.*

He grabbed the young man's arse with both hands taking some time to grope it thoroughly, before pushing their erections together, eliciting an appreciative moan.

Some unfortunate soul chose that very moment to knock on his door. Severus was ready to scream in frustration, but managed to transform it into pure rage. After detangling himself from an equally displeased wizard he threw on his dressing gown, cursing in every language he knew and stormed towards the entrance door, fortunately remembering to cast a glamour on the quite visible tent in front of him, before wrenching it open.

"WHAT?" he screamed into Minerva's face, who could only stare at him absolutely scandalised for several moments, before taking one good look at him and arranging her lips into a far too knowing smirk.

Severus' eyes widened in horror. *She knows! How on earth does she know?*

Then, he remembered his kiss-swollen lips and the lovebites on his neck, not to mention the dishevelled rest of him and his face went up in flames.

*Please, somebody kill me! NOW!*

He had believed that hanging upside down in the air, showing his second-hand underwear to a good
part of the school had been the most humiliating moment in his life, but standing here with his respected friend and colleague, not to mention a former teacher, right in front of him and well aware that he was having sex only moments before, would take the cake any time of day. He was actually pleading the earth to open and swallow him whole right now.

Minerva cleared her throat apparently trying hard not to laugh at him and assumed a somewhat professional air.

"Forgive me for disturbing you, Severus, I have tried to reach you through the Floo, but it was blocked. There is an emergency meeting of the Order in half an hour, Professor Sterling has agreed to take your classes for today."

He nodded once not trusting his voice, still waiting for some sort of jibe. She however simply turned to go, but then shook her head and looked back at him with a fond smile, uttering something that was even worse.

"I'm happy for you, child."

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Harry lay on the bed cursing under his breath and waiting for Severus to return, though somehow he already knew that they wouldn't be able to continue. It was like the Fates had conspired against them! The thought made him frown. His previous experience with the Higher Powers had taught him that a second time was one too many for this to be just a coincidence, something was not right.

Severus entered the bedroom looking like his world perception had received a major crack, but then shook his head and smiled at him apologetically.

"There is an emergency Order meeting in half an hour. Obviously, they are going to discuss the last night's Death Eater revel at length, though I still have to attend."

Harry huffed and let himself fall back onto his pillow. He was painfully hard and would have to take care of it on his own yet again. He slipped his hand into his pyjama pants, only to notice a moment later that Severus was still there and watching him with baited breath. Fighting back his virginal shyness he pulled the pants further down, revealing himself to a lover for the first time in his life, and though he knew that his package was nothing to be ashamed of in comparison to other boys’ he had seen in the showers, he still had to suppress his nervousness at Severus' hungry inspection.

A couple of moments later Severus opened his dressing gown and slid the hem of his nightshirt up to reveal himself in return and Harry's breath hitched at the sight. His cock was nothing like he had ever seen before belonging obviously to a man and not a boy, and was very much like Severus himself, long, slender and elegant. Beautiful! Harry became even harder if possible and had to bite back a moan. He looked up and into the black, smouldering eyes and smirked wickedly.

"The one to come first is the first into the shower."

Despite being older Severus had won and was currently occupying the bathroom, while Harry waited lying on the bed. Breakfast would start in an hour or so, more than enough time for him to fetch his books for the day and attend it with the rest of his friends. The conclusion he had come to earlier was bothering him though. It would mean that either he and Severus were not meant to be together this way or he was overlooking something, and since he couldn't even begin imagining the former, it must be the later.

Then it hit him. The bonding power of the sex-magic, he hadn't thought about it at all!
But for it to work, Severus must be as untouched as I currently am and that is impossible, right?

Somehow Harry got the suspicion that it wasn't that impossible after all. He knew he would have laughed his head off only six months ago, but now he couldn't help but feel deeply saddened at the thought. On the other hand, it would open quite a few possibilities for them to harness power without doing much for it and even to enjoy themselves at that. If they were as compatible as the intervention of the Fates seemed to indicate that is. He would have to research it and fast, since he doubted that he could wait much longer.

Another knock sounded through the rooms, causing the shower noises to cease and a naked and dripping wet Severus appear at the bathroom door.

"It is Draco," he informed him and frowned in concern when the knock was repeated more insistently.

"Shall I open the door?" Harry asked innocently, though his smirk was giving him away.

Severus eyed him for a moment as if gauging his seriousness, before pursing his lips in amusement. "Be my guest, but only if I get to see that memory in a Pensieve later," he drawled over his shoulder returning to the bathroom.

"Of course," Harry grinned and took off his pyjama top, before shrinking and putting on Severus' black silk dressing gown and all but skipped towards the entrance door to the sound of yet another knock.

He knew that what he was doing was reckless, if not outright dangerous, knew what he looked and smelled like right now and therefore what Malfoy was going to think, but he also trusted Severus' judgement in the matter, not to mention that he was curious to see the look on Draco Malfoy's face when he realised that his godfather was bedding Harry Potter.

He raised his Occlumency shields to appear sleepy and indifferent and opened the door to the seemingly agitated Malfoy.

"Seve..." Malfoy stopped abruptly perceiving who was standing before him, then took in his appearance, drew the obvious conclusions and started choking on air in shock and disbelief. Harry refrained from doubling over in laughter at the proud pureblood's reaction.

If only he could see himself now, eyes the size of saucers, spluttering and gaping, absolutely priceless! Severus is going to love this!

"Malfoy," he faked a yawn, "wanna come in?"

He stepped aside in invitation, but the blond did not react, still too shocked to do anything but stare. Harry noticed a crumpled letter in his hand and understood immediately why he came here in apparent anxiety. Well, concerning that at least he could set his mind to rest quite easily.

Finally, Malfoy had gathered himself enough to form a coherent thought and stepped inside giving the impression of an animal walking into a trap. Harry closed the door behind him and invited him to sit flopping himself on the couch, which left the open bedroom door in full view of Malfoy, as well as the quite used looking bed inside. He gulped visibly and did not sit down to Harry's unending amusement.

"Where is Professor Snape?"

"In the shower. He'll be out in a minute." Then added with a smirk. "Sit down, Malfoy, I can assure
you we prefer the rug."

Malfoy graced him with a glare, but gave in. "Don't think I'll believe any of it even for a minute, until I hear it out of his own mouth, Potter."

"Suit yourself," Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "Is there anything you wanted?"

He hesitated just for a moment, but then decided that it didn't matter if Harry knew or not.

"My father informed me that the Dark Lord has found indisputable proof of Professor Snape's betrayal and that he is now to be killed."

"I am not that easy to kill, Draco, do not worry," Severus entered the living room fully dressed, sat down next to Harry and placed a hand on his thigh, as if it were something he did every day.

Draco's eyes lingered on that hand for a moment too long to appear casual, before they returned to his godfather's face.

"But what about the Dark Mark?"

Severus pushed his sleeve up to present his bare arm to an astounded Draco.

"Harry was kind enough to remove it as soon as my true loyalties were discovered."

Draco was now spluttering for real. "But... he's just... I mean how..? ...and you and him..."

Severus sighed rubbing the bridge of his nose in annoyance. "Unfortunately, I must go now, Draco. I am late already." He turned to Harry. "Would you mind leaving us for a moment?"

"Not at all," Harry smiled and stood up. "I'll see you later," he bent down to kiss Severus goodbye ignoring the strangled guttural sound coming from Malfoy's direction and disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door behind him, only to cast a mild eavesdropping charm on it, before proceeding to the bathroom to take his shower.

When he finally heard the water running Severus addressed his godson.

"Draco, I know it is quite a lot to take in all at once, but you need to understand that I am not getting any younger and having practically nothing to offer I cannot afford to be choosy. I for my part consider myself very lucky that Lord Potter has lost his mind and decided he wants me. Just look the facts in the face, my boy, I am poor, unimportant, have a nasty disposition and am ugly to boot."

Malfoy started to protest, but was cut off.

"It is very kind of you, Draco, but it is the truth, and I really could care less if his attentions are only temporary and he will drop me as soon as he either comes to his senses or gets bored, do you understand? I am still going to treasure every moment I am granted with him, since chances are that there might very well never be anyone else ever again."

This was followed by a lengthy silence. Harry could imagine the look on Malfoy's face only too well. Most people did not consider Severus to be human, much less to have feelings of any kind, and he himself was no exception until recently.

"Merlin, you love him, don't you?" came in an almost whisper.

Severus did not answer that, there really was no need to. Harry heard the couch shift when he rose.
"I must go now. We will talk about it later if you insist, though I do not see any use in that, and do not worry about the Dark Lord's threats, I am quite capable of looking after myself."

Harry heard them both leave and cancelled the charm hanging his head in shame, while the warm water cascaded down his shoulders. He knew what was wrong. He was taking this relationship far too casually, just his first among others to come. For Severus on the other hand, this must be his first and only chance at happiness. The Fates were protecting Severus from him, not the other way around.

If they actually were as compatible as he suspected, an engagement bond would form during their first time together. Though, it would be an uneven one, if his feelings for Severus were not deep enough. He had read that those did happen quite often and could be broken easily, if the partners were feeling nothing but a slight infatuation. In the cases where one of the partners felt strongly while the other didn't though, a broken bond would cause the person in question to sink into depression and die. Usually, through suicide or some sort of untreated illness, which was essentially the same.

And Harry knew then without doubt what he had to do. He wanted Severus too much to let him go, so that was out of question. But if he couldn't force himself to fall for him as deeply as was desirable, he could at very least make sure that the bond formed would be unbreakable. The only thing left to decide was which ritual to use.

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When Severus entered the 12 Grimmauld Place kitchen the meeting was already underway.

"Ah, Severus, forgive us for starting without you, but Minerva has mentioned that you might be running late, so we decided not to wait," Dumbledore offered as a form of apology, before continuing with his report of the last night's events.

Severus nodded in acknowledgement and took the only empty seat right next to Minerva, who had obviously saved it for him.

"...the village itself was literally razed to the ground. Nothing but ashes were left to mark its location. The Ministry is working hard to come up with some sort of explanation to appease the muggles, though the extent of the destruction makes it almost impossible. It is quite clear that Voldemort wanted to make a point and he apparently managed."

"Why did the Aurors arrive only in the early morning hours?" someone asked after a grave silence.

Shacklebolt shifted in his seat uneasily. "It seems that some sort of magic masking barrier has been used to prevent a too early detection. We believe that this must have been planned long beforehand, since it takes some time to erect such extensive warding."

He turned to address Dumbledore. "Scrimgeour is going to inform the public about it this afternoon, along with the announcement that he is going to authorise several safety measures, like a Portkey and a premature Apparation License, to ensure Harry Potter's wellbeing. I know for a fact though, that those were authorised several days previously, Albus."

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "I am glad to hear that Rufus thinks about prevention beforehand instead of running around putting out fires, but I have the feeling that this is not all?"

Shacklebolt cleared his throat and looked away. "I believe it has rather something to do with the 50 000 Galleons Mr. Potter has recently donated to the Department of Law Enforcement, if you ask me."
A disturbed sounding murmur followed in the wake of that implication.

"I see," Dumbledore said, his face unreadable, then sighed heavily and turned towards Severus. "Was there any indication privy to the attack, Severus?"

"He has informed us that something was planned for Halloween, as I reported earlier, but he did not divulge any actual plans," he answered hiding his irritation at the old man's jibe. "I have some bad news to add though. It looks like my position has been compromised once and for all."

Dumbledore's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline, though he didn't say anything waiting for him to continue.

"I have not the slightest idea as to what has happened to convince him of my disloyalty, but this morning one of my Slytherins has brought to my attention that I am a prime target from now on."

Minerva and several others exclaimed in dismay. "But what of the Dark Mark? Has it started burning yet?"

"No," Severus told her calmly, "but it is only a matter of time I suppose. However, I have researched into pain suppressing potions with this very possibility in mind a good decade ago and have come up with an acceptable solution, so there is really no need to worry."

"No need to worry?!" Minerva screeched indignantly, but was cut off by the Headmaster.

"Minerva, my dear, I have full confidence in Severus' abilities, not to mention that he certainly would have taken double care where his very life is on the line. So, if he says he has everything under control, then I for one am inclined to believe him." He turned to address the rest of the Order. "This development is unfortunate indeed, but we still have the immediate problem to discuss..."

Severus leaned back and allowed Minerva to fuss over him quite pleased to notice that this time he did not feel any pain at being written off so bluntly.
The Pieces on the Move

Albus Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk in the Headmaster’s office and looking at the small bottle of a light blue potion standing on it with deep reluctance. He really did not want to do this, but Harry’s increasing underhandedness left him no choice it seemed. It would be for the greater good, Harry’s own included. And it wasn’t like he would force the boy into anything, much less unpleasant or harmful. After all, this was not a compelling or mind altering substance, no, this was just a hormone stimulant.

There was a huge Christmas party planned for this year. The entire Order of the Phoenix and their families would attend. A few drops of the Lust Potion in his pumpkin juice and the alcohol, which the youngsters most certainly would get their hands on, not to mention the heady mood, would do the rest. After the inevitable had happened he would inform the boy of the consequences intercourse had in the wizarding world and appeal to his honour to do his duty and marry the witch he had it with immediately. And as to the girl’s part, Dumbledore sincerely doubted there would be even one among them stupid enough to refuse the future Lord Potter and Black’s advances, so he had no worries there.

He might no longer be able to apply pressure or influence to the boy, that however would not be the case for his wife. And since there was no such thing like a divorce in the wizarding world and both spouses had full access to each other’s fortune at all times, this would be as good as having control over Harry’s assets. His political power would be unfortunately still out of reach.

With that in mind Dumbledore did not really care whose daughter would end up the lucky one, although for the Weasleys’ sake he hoped it would be Ginevra, even though she would be harder to put under the thumb than any other.

He sighed and hid the bottle away in one of his drawers. He would do what needed to be done, for the good of them all.

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A week had passed since the Halloween incident as Draco had started calling it in his head and he still had trouble coming to terms with the fact that his godfather had acquired a lover, and not just anyone, but Harry bloody Potter of all people. He could not shake off the feeling that this was going to end badly, that Potter would break Severus’ heart and destroy him beyond repair. On the other hand, he could not deny that Severus was happier than ever before. He had seen him actually smile for Merlin’s sake, and that was saying something! And not only that, he did look healthier, carried himself more confidently, was less prone to sudden bouts of anger, and so on. This relationship seemed to do him good, at least for now.

Draco sighed in resignation. It wasn’t like he would be able to do anything but stand by and watch anyway. Potter was simply too powerful.

To remove the Dark Mark... Merlin’s beard!

And not only magically powerful, judging by what he had seen so far. His mother had written him that she was taken out of their home and brought to a safe house by two men clad in dark grey with their faces veiled, Potter’s own henchmen obviously and not Dumbledore’s. Then, there was his enormous fortune, which he was constantly adding to, even with his considerable expenses, his good standing with the new Minister, the palpable influence on the public and press, and those were only the things he was aware of. Beyond that, he had reason to believe that there was a secret network
under his command by now as well. Potter was on the upward move that much was clear, Draco was still unsure though what goals he was pursuing exactly and if he should join him or simply stay out of his way.

He had a more immediate problem on his hands anyway. The news of Severus’ defection had spread like wild-fire, turning the entire Slytherin common room into a political platform. On the one end were the aspiring Death Eaters screaming for Snape the traitor’s blood, on the other was Nott and his steadily growing following of the anti-Dark-Lord-minded, who were lauding Professor Snape for his courage and common sense. In between were the neutral and the fence-sitters, a group which he currently considered himself a member of.

Draco knew he would have to reveal his true standing soon. The Death Eater wannabes were looking at him askance as it was, seeing as they had expected him to be among them. They had tried to take Nott down, but had ended up hanging upside-down from the common room ceiling one night, with SCUM carved into their backs and no memory of the event. They hadn’t tried again since.

Nott, that sneaky bastard!

That was someone he would have never in a thousand years thought to become a powerful and much admired leader of the Slytherin anti-You-Know-Who-resistance one day. He looked up and towards the dark haired boy sitting with his people close to the fireplace, surrounded by the first and second-years, who had chosen their proximity for protection.

No way in hell he would have come out as he has without someone really powerful backing him up from the shadows!

Draco frowned suddenly realising that there was only one person he could think of to be responsible for that.

“A Knut for your thoughts,” Blaise reminded him of his and Daphne’s presence, successfully returning him to reality.

“Two for yours,” he retorted sighing and rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. Restful sleep had been avoiding him recently.

“You must know something, something of great importance, or you would be sitting with Selwyn and company right now.”

“Is that the reason why you aren’t sitting with them now?” he narrowed his eyes at him.

“Yes,” Blaise answered with a surprising honesty, “and a good part of the house too. So, I suggest you spit it out, before we all get tired of waiting.”

Draco looked up catching many of his house mates averting their eyes, pretending not to eavesdrop, and he knew then what he had to do. If he wanted to secure his piece of the cake, he had to jump on the bandwagon now, as long as there was still a seat or two free.

He rose and cleared his throat loudly enough to get the entire room’s attention.

“My dear Slytherin witches and wizards,” he beamed at them in false cheer, “you all surely have asked yourselves why I’m still sitting here and not there.” He gestured to the Death Eater wannabe part of the room. “The truth is that I’m simply cautious. I don’t know if you have noticed, but there is actually a new Lord on the rise, one who is rumoured to be neither Light nor Dark, and I as a firm supporter of the pureblood ideology just can’t decide if the moderate path he is offering might be
more preferable to the Dark Lord’s extreme one or not, that is all.”

He sat down feeling quite smug about the pandemonium breaking out in front of him. It had been a while since he was the centre of everyone’s attention, he had missed that. Blaise and Daphne were staring at him as if he had grown horns all of a sudden. A flick of Blaise’s wand and the noises around them disappeared behind a privacy ward.

“You aren’t serious, are you?” he asked almost afraid.

“Actually, I am,” he leaned back in his chair folding his hands in his lap. “I meant every word.”

Well, maybe not every word, but most of them for sure.

On Saturday night Harry was pacing the corridor in front of the Room of Requirement nervously. Severus would be here any minute. They hadn’t seen much of each other the entire week and he was highly strung with anticipation. He stopped for a moment to listen and tensed when he heard a barely noticeable footfall approaching.

Taking a deep breath he raised his Occlumency shields and forced his body to relax again. This was it, the moment of truth, the one he was preparing himself for the entire week, maybe even longer than that, there was certainly no telling for sure. He would bind himself irreversibly to another tonight. He had chosen his future spouse and he had chosen wisely, undying love can go hang!

Severus appeared from around a corner and Harry thought to have seen a look of relief pass his features just for a second, before they returned to their usual dispassionate mask.

Did he really think I wouldn’t show up? Well, in that case he’s going to receive a hell of a surprise tonight. Harry pursed his lips in secret amusement while leading Severus into the set of rooms he had ordered beforehand.

The first one was an elegantly decorated living room very much resembling Severus’ own. Harry was hoping he would feel more at home in such an environment and therefore be more accessible emotionally.

They made themselves comfortable on the couch in front of a merrily burning fire, but when Severus leaned closer in obvious invitation to kiss Harry forced himself not to take it.

“Severus, I…” he cleared his suddenly closed up throat and launched into a carefully prepared speech “…I’ve been thinking.”

And since he did not look Severus in the eyes, he had not noticed the pain and resignation entering them.

Well, you knew this would come sooner or later, did you not, though you have not expected it to be quite that soon.

Severus threw up his shields full force to prevent himself from falling apart there and then, feeling his heart crumbling slowly in his chest. The Fates did apparently really hate him.

“When attempting to seduce you on Halloween I’ve overlooked the legal side of it all and that you would land in Azkaban if this ever came out.”

Ah, an excellent excuse. Well thought through at least.
“I believe we should take care of that first, before we do something that might have severe consequences.”

Severus closed his eyes readying himself for the final stab... which did not come. Thus, he opened them again to watch a nervous and blushing Harry fumble with what looked suspiciously like the Golden Scroll, before it was thrust into his hands without further preamble.

He blinked and took a closer look at the object lying heavily in his hand. Merlin’s balls, it **was** the Golden Scroll! An official offer of marriage, magical betrothal contract included!

That was the moment when Severus relaxed and smiled in relief.

*It is all just a dream! You must be dreaming, since no way in hell would the Heir of the House Potter and Black make an official offer of marriage to scum like you.*

He sighed wistfully and opened the Scroll to read it through. He could honestly not remember the last time he had a nice dream like that, so he’d better savour it as long as it lasted.

The betrothal contract was quite straightforward and was to be sealed with a magical bond formed through a simple ritual during their first ever sexual contact.

*See, it is just a dream! Harry absolutely cannot be as untouched as you are, so this would not work in real life, but it is lovely to imagine nonetheless!*

Severus beamed at a nervously waiting Harry and signed the contract with the quill provided, sealing it with his blood and magic a moment later. The surge of power he felt spreading through his body made him frown, though he discarded his doubts quickly, believing it to be just part of his imagination.

Harry was a bit confused. Severus had not reacted the way he had expected. He decided however that it was a good thing, seeing as he had prepared himself to have to strong-hand him into it. To witness Severus’ unveiled happiness had not only confirmed him in his choice, but made him feel quite pleased with himself, since he was the source of it.

He pocketed his copy of the signed contract and all but dragged Severus to the bedroom. He had waited for this far too long and Merlin help the poor soul to step into his way now!

The room was equipped with a luxurious bed and all the items they would need for the bonding ritual. They hurriedly stripped naked and took position to either side of a small stone altar with a round clay dish standing on it. The ritual was quite simple, they burned herbs and fruit as offerings to the gods reciting the ritual words together. Then made their vows, put on the engagement bracelets Harry had provided and sealed them with their magic, and finally, finally proceeded to the bed.

Harry fell over the man lying underneath him like a hungry animal, though taking into consideration that he was hard enough to cut glass it was quite understandable. Severus did not seem to mind anyway, kissing him back as much as he was able to under such a forceful onslaught. It felt great, but was not enough anymore, so Harry pulled away abruptly and pushed Severus’ legs apart to settle himself better, before starting to thrust his cock against the man’s. They both moaned at the glorious sensation as Harry fell into a fast paced rhythm. This was great! Far better than anything his own hand could ever produce!

He knew he wouldn’t last long, feeling the pleasure pooling in his lower regions and increased the pressure on Severus’ cock to bring him off first. The part of his brain still functioning pointed out that it was just his silly pride talking, though he still couldn’t help believing that he would feel more
accomplished that way.

Hardly a moment later, Severus arched under him and spilled himself with a strangled cry. Harry managed just another thrust, before the force of his sudden orgasm overwhelmed his senses and he followed Severus into absolute bliss. His last thought before everything went black was that it had been worth the wait indeed.

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Severus slowly came to awareness to find something on top of him, something heavy and warm. Having a good idea this time what it was he did not go for his wand, but shook his head to try and get rid of the grogginess still clouding his mind. After the disorientation receded he realised that he was lying naked in an unfamiliar bedroom, with an equally naked Harry on top of him. There was a sweet smell of burned sugar in the air and he took a look around searching for its source. His eyes landed on the small ritual altar on the other end of the room and he blanched in shock.

*It was not a dream?! Merlin, this just cannot be!*

He raised his trembling left arm, saw the golden bracelet adorning it and started hyperventilating for real. He was engaged! He really was engaged! To Harry! Remembering his Occlumency he took several deep breaths and calmed himself down.

He ran his fingers over the masterfully crafted band in wonder.

*It is real, it really is!*

He half sobbed half chuckled when the consequences of its presence on his arm dawned on him.

*Who would have thought that the term ‘marrying up’ would apply to me one day? Or marrying at all for that matter?*

Another thought entered his mind making him cackle in glee.

*Potter and Black are spinning in their graves right now!*

This was the ultimate revenge for everything those two had ever done to him. From this moment on there were no open accounts between them. He sighed happily and ran his hand through the raven mop of hair resting on his chest, smiling down on it in fondness.

*My fiancé."

Harry groaned and raised his head a bit to blink at him sleepily and Severus felt like falling in love with him all over again. He settled on turning them over and taking his cock into his mouth instead, effectively reducing his husband to be to a puddle of moaning lust.

A good while later and after Harry had returned the favour they lay under the covers trying to come up with some plans for the future.

“We should wait with the wedding ceremony until you are out of school to avoid trouble with the Headmaster, or at the very least until you turn of age.”

“Yeah, Hermione and Theodore had planned that too, and look where they are now,” Harry chuckled shaking his head, then sighed and turned serious again. “To be honest I’m not that much concerned about what Dumbledore might do. It would be at worst unpleasant, and that we surely can live with,” he smiled at the man lying next to him, realising fully for the first time that they were we
from now on. “We have enough money and the seats at the Wizengamot can wait. It’s rather Voldemort who worries me, Severus, there is actually a prophecy connecting us, one which says that either of us has to die at the hand of the other, or not be able to live properly.”

Severus nodded being obviously privy to that.

“He doesn’t know that part as far as I’m aware, but knowing my luck the Fates are going to throw me in his way sooner rather than later. I need to prepare myself for the ultimate battle between us, since it’s inevitable no matter the outcome, and I also need to unlock the power he knows not. Trouble is however that it might reveal itself only after I reach magical majority and I simply can’t afford to wait for that.”

Severus thought it over for a couple of moments. “You have something in mind then I assume?”

Harry nodded and bit his lip suddenly nervous. There was no telling if Severus would agree to something as risky as this.

“When researching all kinds of engagement and marriage bonds, I came upon one so strong that it causes premature emancipation in one of the partners if the other is already of age,” he paused to gather his courage, “the Triple Union.”

Severus sat up staring down on him in disbelief. “Have you lost your mind? This bond has not been even attempted in at least five hundred years, much less successfully, and you are suggesting we try it?! You have researched it you say? Then you must know very well that we might end up crippled, insane or squibs, if not all three if something goes awry!”

“Yes, I know that,” Harry sat up as well and took Severus’ hand in both of his own. “On the other hand, if everything goes well we might end up the two most powerful wizards alive. Besides, I have this feeling that it’s the right thing to do. I had the same feeling when choosing you my partner for life you know, like it’s meant to be.”

Severus snorted not thinking much of his sanity in either case, but sighed and nodded his reluctant consent. If he was honest with himself, he had a similar feeling deep inside as well.
Becoming One Flesh

In the following weeks, quite a few Slytherins had finally gathered enough courage to individually approach their Head of house to ask for advice and help to escape initiation into the Death Eater ranks. It was partly due to Draco Malfoy’s open rebellion, but also to the fact that Professor Snape was still healthy and sane, despite having defied the Dark Lord in the worst way possible.

Imagine their surprise when coming to the appointed meeting they had found Harry Potter sitting on the couch in the Defence Master’s living room and offering them his assistance, with no strings attached no less. It didn’t take long for many of them to put two and two together and recognise the identity of the supposed new Lord, which gave the entire conflict a wholly new dimension, not to mention sprang the most ridiculous rumours into life that soon circulated in all of Hogwarts.

Fortunately, most of the teachers had found them too farfetched to be true. Professor McGonagall though was secretly frowning inside and so was Poppy Pomfrey. However, both women were too busy to go hunt for the truth and so let it be for the time being, deciding to quietly keep an eye out from the shadows.

Draco had received an angry letter from his father demanding explanation to his behaviour, which he had answered in detailed length, taking great satisfaction in practically sending his entire family where the sun did not shine with all appropriate decorum. Severus and his mother were proud of him he could tell, and that was all that mattered.

Dumbledore was absent from school more often than not, ever since Scrimgeour had proposed the reformation of the laws concerning nonhuman magical beings to the Wizengamot, causing a heated debate in all circles of magical society. No better time than now to start on the first part of the complex and dangerous marriage bond Harry and Severus had agreed upon.

The Triple Union, the union of body, mind and magic, was more than just a bond. It was a fusion of two beings into one that just consisted of two. They would assimilate each other’s physical attributes, knowledge and magical power, merge them with their own and literally transform into something new, bit by bit. If some stage of the bonding went awry, their bodies, minds or magic would twist into something unpredictable and definitely undesirable. Careful preparation of every single stage and its meticulous execution was therefore of utmost importance.

They lay on the by now very familiar bed in Severus’ quarters touching, licking, kissing, exploring the other’s body in its current form for the last time tonight. They had been at it every single minute of their free time for the last three weeks and tomorrow on Friday the 29th of November the rise of the new moon would mark the beginning of a 52 hours long ceremony to bond their bodies in marriage; the first and purely physical part of the Triple Union.

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Harry was sitting and eating lunch with his friends after their Care of Magical Creatures class, feeling strangely composed. He had expected to be nervous or at least excited about what was going to begin in less than two hours. He wasn’t. All he felt was a deep peace with himself and the world at the moment. He hadn’t informed anyone about what he and Severus were about to do, telling his friends only that they had planned a bit of alone time this weekend, so they wouldn’t worry. He knew they all would have tried to dissuade them if he had, and negative energy to tarnish their enterprise was the last thing they needed.

The Chamber of Secrets had been appropriately warded, charmed and equipped to host their physical
marriage and they would descend there for the entire weekend. They had the Room of Requirement in mind first, but then Harry had remembered that the house-elves could enter it, which would be disastrous to their plans, if not their very lives. Thus the Chamber of Secrets it was, being the only place in the castle safe and secluded enough.

Back in the Gryffindor tower Harry had packed his book bag with everything he would need for his Monday morning classes, said a short goodbye to Hermione, Ginny and Neville and ventured out under his invisibility cloak. Severus was already there when he entered Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. One look at him and Harry knew immediately that, unlike himself, he was on his last nerve. So, he went over and embraced him, just holding him firmly in his arms until he felt him relax and melt into them.

Severus released a shuddering breath that sounded suspiciously like a strangled sob, though gathered himself quickly, seeing as his fears of Harry not showing up were obviously completely unfounded. Harry gave him a moment more before looking into his face to plant a chaste kiss on his lips. It was still staggering to him just how vulnerable this man was where he was involved. Severus was strong enough to survive anything people and life itself threw at him, anything but Harry leaving him it seemed, and he felt humbled by the very thought.

I’ll learn to love you the way you deserve to be loved, he swore silently leading his soon to be husband towards the sinks and hissed for them to slide aside. Closing the opening behind them, he followed Severus down the winding stairs.

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They stood next to each other at a short desk clad in traditional wedding robes, which were simple white linen with nothing underneath, and waited for the new moon to rise fully. A single chime of a bell sounded through the chamber signalling the very fact and they moved closer to take up the two copies of the marriage contract and read them through from the beginning to the end. The parchment’s magic allowed it to be signed only after the participants had acquainted themselves with its contents. Signing and sealing it with their blood and magic they exchanged the copies and repeated the procedure. Done with the paperwork they spoke the traditional vows, promising each other commitment, fidelity and care, exchanged the wedding bands and sealed their promise with a kiss. According to the wizards’ laws they would be wed the moment they had consummated the marriage. The laws of magic however demanded a bit more than that.

Since the first part of the Triple Union was purely physical, no words would be exchanged between the partners until the bell sounded again some 52 hours later. Anything spoken would be in old Gaelic and directed to their magic or the gods whose blessing they desired. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t communicate at all of course, they would, only with their eyes, hands, lips and the rest of their bodies, conveying the meaning of the unspoken words in the most primeval way. Harry for one was very much looking forward to that and Severus was too he could tell.

To secure the blessing of the gods they needed to present them with an offering far more substantial than just herbs and fruit. To be precise, with their lives’ essence, their blood and semen freely given. Thus, they moved over to the stone altar standing at the foot of the Salazar Slytherin’s statue and started a magical fire in the clay dish on it. Then, they began burning ritual herbs, reciting the required prayer together to gain the deities’ attention. Harry took Severus’ left hand and planted a kiss on the inside of the palm, before cutting it diagonally with a ritual knife and letting the blood fall into the flames. He was glad to know that it didn’t hurt him or it would have been hard for him to do so. Obviously, he did care for the man far more than he had previously believed. All for the better though, he thought smiling slightly when he felt Severus’ lips touch his own palm before cutting it. Severus deserved a lot better than what he had managed to show him so far.
Yes, you do deserve better than a silly boy, Harry could not help but think when kissing Severus like there was no tomorrow, and I’m lucky you chose to love me anyway!

He didn’t know where this desperation came from all of a sudden, but he pulled away and turned Severus around pressing him to his chest and pushed the hem of his robes up to wrap his hand around his cock. He felt strangely compelled to show him just how grateful he was, lubricating his hand with Severus’ precome and gliding it along the familiar length. So, he took his time to give him as much pleasure as possible, knowing by now very well how to do so.

Severus’ release was glorious! He came moaning and shuddering into Harry’s hand, who took care to gather as much of it as possible before letting it drip into the flames. Trouble was however that Severus’ knees had given away and since he was too heavy for Harry to carry for long, he had to lower him carefully to the floor. And there he lay out of breath, his face flushed and eyes half-lidded, still coming down from his orgasm. Harry had seen him in the afterglow before, though he had to admit that he had never looked as thoroughly done as that.

Beautiful!

Harry felt his insides summersault and a fierce protectiveness take hold of his chest, constricting it almost painfully. This was his Severus, his husband to be, and he would kill anyone who tried to harm him in any way! That was when he finally realised that he was actually very much in love and nearly laughed out loud at his own stupidity. Hermione had told him often enough that he could be thick at times, but he had never believed it fully until now.

Merlin’s balls!

He could only shake his head and sigh in resignation. But then, he looked down at the man on the floor and smiled happily, joining him and taking him into his arms. All the better.

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Severus was surprised at Harry’s suddenly acquired cuddliness, when he had recovered enough to notice that is. Merlin, that was the best cock-rub he had ever had! Really, he did not know what had gotten into Harry today, not that he was complaining, but he had never been like that before. There were times even when he had appeared almost... cold. He would never admit it aloud, but the thought that Harry might not love him after all had crossed his mind more than once in the past weeks, and the lingering doubt left in its wake was slowly killing him inside.

He would have never said a thing of course, even if he should have found out eventually that it was indeed the case. He had decided long before Halloween that he would take whatever Harry chose to offer, but... Well, once again he couldn’t help himself and hope to get something real this time and to learn that it was all in vain yet again would have destroyed him for good. He was quite sure of that and therefore had not dared to think about it too much. Now though, seeing Harry smile at him so lovingly, he felt that hope melt the icy dread in his heart and fill it with happiness instead.

Not wanting to be outdone he pushed the hem of Harry’s robes up and took hold of his cock, making him moan and buckle into his hand. He loved it when he was so responsive, so pliant to anything he might have in mind! Loved that Harry, though being undoubtedly the dominant one in their relationship, allowed him to take control whenever he was inclined, giving himself over completely. Severus did not lead often, but it still pleased him to know that he could anytime.

He ran his hand up and down slowly, applying pressure in just the right places to achieve the desired effect, knowing all too well by now how Harry liked it. Then, he quickened his movements only to slow down again and continued in the same way, trying to draw out the young man’s pleasure as
long as possible, not caring that he was driving him insane in the process.

Letting Harry’s semen drip into the flames a good while later, he couldn’t help feeling smug about managing to return the favour as it was due. Harry lay on the floor flushed and breathless, with legs spread wide and his now flaccid cock hanging in between. If not for the warming charms they had cast generously on the entire chamber, he would have been worried about his health. They needed to recite the final words of the prayer together, so he went over and helped him up instead of going for the second round. There would be more than enough opportunities in the following hours after all.

When the ritual was finished the flames flared high and went out on their own. He could feel a foreign magic settle itself in the room and knew immediately that their prayer was heard and the blessing they had asked for granted. Harry beamed at him happily and he could only smile as happily in return, quite relieved that the deities seemed to look at them favourably. If they didn’t, many more offerings would have been due until a blessing was granted, if it was granted at all. It was definitely a good sign!

Next would be the preparation of the lubricant they would need for their ultimate joining, his stomach though chose that moment to complain about its emptiness. A look at the clock high up on the wall told him that it was only five pm, but judging from the answering rumble of Harry’s own, he was hungry as well. So, they went over to the dining area set up further away and chose a menu each from the generous assortment of dishes under Stasis Charm the house-elves had provided.

Severus had to admit that watching Harry eat and being watched in return had a strange sort of intimacy. The rules of etiquette were loosened here with only the two of them present, meaning of course that they were witnessing behaviour strangers would never get to see. To watch someone lick and suck their fingers did repulse him usually. The way Harry was doing it however had an entirely different effect. He was glad not to have anything on down below or he would have started shifting uncomfortably by now.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a warm, bare foot glide under his robes and rub along his leg a couple of times, before settling itself in his lap and on his erection. Although, Harry was eating on as if nothing was happening.

_Sneaky little brat! No wonder the Hat wanted him in Slytherin._

Deciding that two could play this game, he proceeded with his meal pretending not to notice his cock being foot rubbed, though it grew progressively hard not to become cross-eyed.

After they had finished to everyone’s satisfaction and cleaned up they started preparing the next ritual. The physical bond of the Triple Union could be achieved through three different sets of rituals, depending on the gender of the participants. And since they were both male, their set included the preparation of a lubricant. However, only a handful of herbs were allowed to be added as relaxing, pain numbing and healing agents, the base of it had to consist of their own body fluids. They didn’t want to use blood or faeces, so they settled on spit and spunk, not to mention that were was a very pleasant way to get both at once.

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Harry ran his tongue along the sensitive, veined flesh of Severus’ cock for the third and last time tonight. He circled the head before closing his lips around it and sucking gently, eliciting a guttural moan. He smiled and took it deeper working the part he couldn’t fit with his hand. He loved the noises Severus was making and the look of unveiled pleasure on his face whenever he managed to glance up. The bitter taste of the come however was something he had needed some time to get used to. He still had found that he didn’t mind that as much as he had thought he would at the beginning,
since Severus’ musky smell was turning him on better than any aphrodisiac.

He looked up without interrupting his ministrations and was met with a beautifully flushed face in a halo of raven hair and a pair of lust clouded, black eyes watching him. How could he have never noticed how much he loved this man? It had been so obvious from the very beginning, if he thought about it. He would make up for that he promised to himself looking back down and concentrating on getting more of those noises. He would show him just how much he meant to him, tell him even. He never had before of course, neither had Severus for that matter. But in his case it was understandable, while nothing could excuse Harry’s behaviour entirely. He had asked the man to marry him, for Merlin’s sake, out of entirely selfish reasons! What had he been thinking?!

He sped up his movements sucking harder when he felt Severus nearing completion and had to use his free hand to hold his hips down. A couple of minutes more and he was shuddering and coming into his mouth yet again. Harry transferred the come into the porcelain dish containing the nearly ready lubricant, while Severus was enjoying the afterglow and proceeded to bespeak it with the help of his wand, infusing it with the rest of the herbs. A few moments later it changed its consistency from thick and gluey to pleasantly slippery and was officially ready for usage. He took a sniff liking its musky male odour combined with the herbal one immediately. Unfortunately, both of them were too exhausted now to even think of continuing. So, he put it under the Stasis Charm and left it on the workbench, climbing back into bed to join the already half-asleep Severus.

He covered them both and collected his customary kiss goodnight, before nestling himself into his lover’s arms with a happy smile. Tomorrow could not come soon enough.
Harry and Severus woke up late on Saturday morning, very hungry and well rested, which was good since the main ritual would take hours and they wouldn’t be able to stop until it was completed. They took a quick wash and a decent breakfast, then changed the bedding making sure everything was completely new and clean, before blessing the bed by soaking it in incense. Their robes they wouldn’t need after the first ritual bathing.

Severus had to calm himself through Occlumency again, standing naked next to Harry in front of the tinny artificial lake they had created. This was it, the beginning of a new life. Whether a good or a miserable one was now for the Fates to decide. No matter the outcome though, he would be definitely married to the young man standing next to him by the end of the day and that was giving him comfort.

He glanced over to Harry and was met with the picture of absolute calm, and he wasn’t even using Mind Arts he could tell. **Merlin, how is he doing this?**

Harry’s emerald eyes rose to meet his, chasing away the last of his fears with the love and assurance shining in them. He smiled slightly and offered his hand, which Severus took without hesitation, and they stepped into the water together.

The sensuality of Harry’s hands gliding across his skin and the faint tingle of magic in the water had overwhelmed his senses rather quickly, leaving him in an almost drugged state of mind. The solidity of Harry’s body under his own hands was thankfully anchoring him to reality, or he was quite sure he would have just soared up and drifted away. They washed each other following the prescribed pattern, slowly building up their arousal to the point where the urge to go further became almost impossible to resist. Severus held back though, since being the submissive partner meant that he had to be taken first, and only after Harry had released into him would he be allowed to reverse their positions. He could choose not to take him in turn of course, but in doing so he would forfeit his right to top ever again and that was out of question.

Harry grabbed his hand and led him out of the lake and straight to the bed in a hurry. It was quite obvious that he had to hold himself in check to not simply shove Severus on it and his by now very rigid cock up his arse. No, Severus had to give himself to him. The taking after all had a prescribed pattern to it too, and ignoring it would ruin everything.

Severus’ heart hammered in his chest in excitement and virginal fear of what was now to come. He did not hesitate though to climb on the bed and arrange himself comfortably, before bending his knees and spreading them in invitation. Harry followed him and positioned himself between them, careful to not come in contact with his skin. Then, he bent over Severus’ cock, not with the intention to touch it though, but to let his breath ghost over it when he spoke.

The ritual words leaving Harry’s mouth in a hoarse, lust leaden voice hit Severus’ manhood with the force of a sledge hammer, reverberating through his entire body in recurring waves of pleasure, making him writhe and moan with an animalistic abandon he would have never believed himself capable of. Sensing his pending release, Harry drew back and out of the way of the come bursting out of Severus’ cock in long, ropy spurts, making sure not to be hit. Severus collapsed breathing heavily and struggled not to pass out.

*Holy Merlin, this was supposed to relax me, not to kill me, thank you very much!*

He glared half-heartedly at Harry’s smug smirk, but did accept his possessive kiss eagerly after Harry
had cleaned and taken him into his arms. Harry drew back and summoned the lubricant into his hand assuming his previous position, though looking quite nervous this time. They were entering an unknown terrain here and one that could turn possibly dangerous, but backing off at this point was absolutely out of question. Harry took a deep breath and dipped his fingers into the dish, beginning a new chant that just like the first one seemed to go directly to the very core of his being, bringing his flaccid cock back to life in record time.

Ignoring his throbbing erection, Severus concentrated on the feeling of Harry’s finger coaxing his ring of muscle open and slowly sliding inside. He was wondering about the lack of discomfort when the finger twisted and turned for a while, before withdrawing to return accompanied by another one, until he remembered the magical properties of the lubricant and relaxed, allowing himself to finally enjoy the new sensations. When the third finger joined in, he began slowly rocking his hips, elated by the feeling of the fullness and the knowledge that he was fucking himself on Harry’s hand.

Harry finished the chant and withdrew his fingers leaving Severus to feel strangely bereft and tingle with anticipation at the same time. Their eyes locked. Harry’s emerald ones were nervously asking permission and he could only smile and nod, knowing without doubt that with the exception of being loved, this was something he had been craving for the greater part of his life.

Harry took his lubricated cock and pushed its head inside, stopping and looking up startled when they both felt the air around them shift suddenly and condense with awakening magic. A magic so old and powerful that it was frightening. Severus’ eyes met Harry’s again and they both agreed immediately that this whole thing had been a bad idea indeed. However, Harry being the Gryffindor he was, leaned forward to take hold of both of his hands without breaking eye contact. He intertwined their fingers and began pushing further in until he was completely sheathed. Then, he began to chant again ignoring the might congregating around them.

Severus lay under him breathing heavily and trying hard not to let the tears clinging to his eyelashes escape. He knew the technicalities of anal sex like the back of his hand. The emotional impact of such intimacy with another human being was something the books had somehow failed to mention. He was aware of every single inch of the hardness inside him and it was strange, different from what he had expected, neither better nor worse, just different. The knowledge however that it was Harry’s cock in there and the fact that by the law of wizards at least they were married now, was slowly but steadily undoing him. He was very glad therefore that Harry had finally finished the chant and let go of his hands to put his arms around his back for better leverage, before sliding almost all the way out and thrusting back in several times, changing the angle until he finally hit his prostate.

Jolted by the bolt of pleasure shooting down his spine he threw his head back and moaned, clenching his jaw a second later to hold in an expletive. The green-eyed monster above him chuckled and rammed that spot again, and again, and again, harder, installing a steady rhythm and ignoring the nails scraping its back in order to drive him mercilessly towards heaven. Severus was arching, wreathing and moaning in the throes of passion, and biting the insides of his cheeks until they bled with only one thought still present in his mind, reciting it like a mantra to ground his sanity.

*I am not allowed to speak! I am not going to speak!*

And Merlin was it hard! He wanted to beg like a whore, to spit profanities, to scream Harry’s name as loudly as he possibly could...

Harry slammed into him one last time and cried out shuddering almost spasmodically. Barely a moment later a wave of pleasure he had never though could exist washed over him, followed by the magic lying in wait, extinguishing his very being and regenerating it again, though he was not conscious to acknowledge it.
Harry came slowly to himself and inhaled deeply becoming immediately aware of the smell of sex, herbs and Severus surrounding him. That intoxicating mixture was enough to awaken his cock still buried deep inside the aforementioned wizard as well. He smiled and opened his eyes feeling strangely refreshed. He had expected to be completely worn out, but feeling the lingering magic in the air he remembered that they were not done yet.

He raised his head grinning goofily and absolutely not ashamed of it. That was by far the best thing that had ever happened to him in his entire life! The grin on Severus’ face was not much different anyway, though knowing him he would deny that later for sure. He sighed wistfully and very, very reluctantly pulled out of him, before rolling to the side with a grunt. They needed to change and bless the bed again, go through the second ritual bathing and then it would be his hole on the line. To be honest, he was very much looking forward to that. It did seem to be quite pleasurable, or where Severus was concerned at least, and he was curious to find out for himself. He turned his head to look into his husband’s... Merlin, my husband! He’s my husband now!

Judging by the look on Severus’ face the same thought had occurred to him as well. His black eyes were glinting with so much emotion that Harry nearly lost himself and swooped down on him to kiss and take him again. But the faint tingle of magic on his skin reminded him thankfully that it wasn’t his turn, and if he did ignore that, Severus would likely never forgive him.

Severus smiled sadly, as if reading his thoughts and sighed getting out of bed and reaching for his wand to clean them both. Harry followed him in a moment. The sooner they were done with the chores, the faster they would be able to return to the more pleasant activities after all.

Harry was absolutely heady when they had finally left the lake, led by Severus this time, and all but threw himself on the bed spreading his legs wide. Severus smirked at his enthusiasm and took his time climbing after him, conveniently ignoring his impatient glare. He positioned himself over Harry’s cock and began speaking. Harry arched and had to clench his jaw, lest he started cursing when the first wave of pleasure hit him. Barely two minutes later he was coming so hard that he bit into his arm to prevent Severus’ name from escaping him.

Holy Merlin... He shook his head to clear the spots still dancing behind his eyes and had to seriously ask himself how Severus had managed to last for that long. The cleaning spell washed over him and he looked up to find Severus’ lips close to his and no time to wonder how they got there that fast due to being devoured alive. The next thing he knew was Severus kneeling between his legs, chanting softly and lubricating his member, before dipping his fingers into the dish once more and pressing them against his opening.

It was a strange feeling to have something inside and moving there he had to admit, though by no means an unpleasant one thanks to the lubricant. When the third finger had joined in he began moving his hips in tandem with Severus’ hand, getting impatient again. He could have sworn that Severus was going so slowly on purpose, no matter how irrational that was.

Finally, Severus had finished the chant and replaced his fingers with the tip of his cock and just like the first time, the ancient magic began gathering around them, though not even nearly as overwhelmingly as before. He pushed inside slowly and Harry could not help thinking that it was indeed as comforting as Severus’ presence in his mind, only far more substantial. Giving him time to adjust Severus started to chant again. His voice rich and seductively low seemed to reverberate through his entire being, leaving him to feel strangely open and vulnerable. To his utter embarrassment his eyes began burning treacherously and he was therefore more than glad when the chant had finally ended.
Severus shifted to position himself more comfortably and began slowly thrusting into him. When he had finally hit his prostate Harry had to clench his jaw moaning gutturally, the almost vindictive glint in Severus’ eye though did not seem to bode well. He shifted again and began hammering that spot ferociously, making Harry scream in pleasure and bite into his arm again. He did not know how long they had been at it, but was only too glad to feel Severus finally stiffen and release into him with a cry, welcoming the wave of the familiar pleasure and darkness in its wake and basking in the knowledge that he had actually somehow managed not to speak.

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They woke up late on Sunday afternoon feeling dizzy and week, but happy nonetheless, and remained lying curled up on the soiled bed too lazy to care about it or their own cleanness, content to just hold each other. The main ritual seemed to have gone well or they would have known by now if it hadn’t. It was good news of course, even though Severus could not bring himself to enjoy it fully, remembering the sheer might they had challenged and brought upon themselves. He really should have never agreed to this madness. The union of the body was the easiest of the three and the others might not go as smoothly.

Seized by a sudden fear of losing him, he tightened his hold on Harry almost painfully, causing him to raise his head and blink at him in confusion. Thankfully, six o’clock had finally arrived announced by the single chime of the bell, ending the ceremony and their silence.

“Oh, thank Merlin!” Harry exclaimed sighing in relief. “Severus, what’s the matter?”

Severus did not answer though. He just continued to cling to him for dear life trembling slightly. How would he have explained it to him anyway? His fear was well founded, that much at least was for sure. There was not a single good thing in his life that had not turned sour in the end, so who was to tell that it won’t happen again?

Harry cursed and summoned his glasses putting them on hastily. “Severus?” he sounded almost frantic, “Severus, dammit, look at me!”

He opened his eyes to be met with Harry’s concerned ones. “Are you alright?”

He swallowed and nodded loosening his grip somewhat, feeling embarrassed at his little display and called upon his Occlumency to get himself back together again. “Yes.”

“What was that then?” Harry asked not buying it.

“Nothing... it is nothing, just... Never mind,” he murmured softly and looked away.

“Severus,” Harry cupped his cheek and coaxed him to meet his anxious gaze. “You’re not having second thoughts now, are you?”

He suppressed the urge to laugh bitterly and settled on a sad smile instead. “No, not the way you think at least.”

Harry’s eyes were searching his for truth, but then he sighed and accepted that, apparently deciding to let it go for now.

“Come on,” he smiled and took his hand sitting up. “Let’s have a bath and then something to eat. I’m starving.”

Severus stomach loudly agreed, making them both chuckle. Harry’s smile slid suddenly off his face and he put his arms around his neck to pull him into a breathtaking kiss.
“I love you, husband, just so you know,” he whispered breathily into his ear and dragged him out of bed before he had time to fully register what he had said.

He did register it though, a moment or two later, and froze in shock coming to an abrupt halt at the edge of the lake. Harry however would have none of that and pushed him into the water with a resounding splat, laughing his arse off when he came up spluttering and spitting, looking like a wet dog.

Okay, he got the hint, Harry did not want to talk about it. That did not mean that they won’t talk about it though. He was about to open his mouth to do just that when a pair of eager lips attached themselves to it. Well, maybe not now, he conceded giving in and kissing him in return. They would have time enough for that later.
Monday morning was crawling by at an agonising pace. The transformation had begun and Harry was fidgety and restless, even feverish at times. Hermione was urging him to visit Madam Pomfrey when lunch had finally arrived and he promised her to go right after his afternoon Ancient Runes class. Though, he was well aware that nothing would be able to help him for the next two weeks, until the rise of the full moon to be precise. Nothing, but spending time in his husband’s bed, that is. Sex would relax them enough to be able to sleep somewhat restfully and though it would be highly risky to meet every night, there was no other alternative, if they wanted to sleep at all.

He had debated with himself long and hard if he should tell his friends, or Hermione at least, but in the end had decided not to. This was something between Severus and himself, something they needed to see through without a third party involved. He did inform them though that they were now married, it was only prudent.

Dumbledore was still absent on regular basis and was going to be for a good while yet. They really couldn’t have chosen a better time. He smiled absentmindedly chewing on his sandwich, did not dare to look over to the head table though. He could honestly not remember a time in his life where he had been that happy or that content. It was like being consciously aware that he wasn’t alone anymore and never would be as long as he had Severus by his side. It wasn’t just an assumption, it was a fact. Like a law of nature or something...

Harry shook his head. Since when had he become so philosophical? Severus must be rubbing off on him. He sighed dreamily and put his sandwich down to take a sip of his pumpkin juice, meeting Neville’s eyes across the table, who was watching him smirking far too knowingly. Harry really could not help the blush crawling up his neck despite his Occlumency. One did not need to be a Seer to know what he was thinking. He huffed and rolled his eyes before returning to his meal. He was a fool in love and not ashamed of that.

Severus was pacing his living room in a strange state of agitation. It felt like his entire skin was crawling with something and constantly telling himself that it was just the transformation, was not helping the urge to scratch in the least. There was a knock on his door and he nearly ran towards it informed by the wards that it was Harry. Throwing it wide open he was instantly enveloped into a pair of invisible arms and sighed in relief when the prickling of his skin lessened. He stepped back into his rooms dragging the weight attached to him inside and let the door fall close, returning the fierce embrace.

“Missed me that much already,” he joked half-heartedly pressing his face into the invisible crook of the neck and inhaling the familiar scent almost greedily.

Harry groaned in frustration. “It’s going to be hell! And we are supposed to endure that for the next ten days? I don’t know about you, but I’ll definitely go mad!”

“It was your idea, if I recall correctly, so stop whining and fuck me already.” He really did not know where that filthy mouth of his had come from all of a sudden. Harry must be rubbing off on him no doubt, but somehow he found it most liberating.

“Oh! Pushy, aren’t we?” Harry purred most seductively and glided his hands down Severus’ back to get hold of his arse.
Severus pulse quickened considerably and he began tugging on the invisibility cloak, impatient to finally get to see his husband. Not that it was of much use, since as soon as Harry’s face came into view he found himself pressed against the nearest wall and snogged senseless. The next thing he knew was him falling backwards on the bed with only a vague recollection of how he got there and pinned to it by Harry’s body.

This was great! Far better than their first time, since it wasn’t bound to regulations of any kind. They practically could do anything! Right now though, he wanted to feel Harry moving deep inside him again more than anything else. Severus arched into the hand cupping his erection through the cloth of his trousers and moaned wantonly into Harry’s mouth. With anyone else he would have never given that much of himself so freely, this however was his Harry, his husband, there was really no need to hold anything back.

Skilful fingers made short work with the buttons of his shirt and an even more skilful mouth attached itself to his neck, sucking, nibbling and licking all the way down to one of his nipples, driving him insane with need. Somehow managing to gather enough presence of mind, he summoned his wand and banished the rest of their clothing to the floor. He usually enjoyed the foreplay as much as the actual sex, but right now he simply had no patience left for that. Getting the message, Harry opened the drawer of the bedside table and took out a bottle of lubricant. Severus’ own creation of course, since he would never use anything else.

When Harry had finally entered him Severus tightened his arms around his back and pressed him to his chest. They lay like that for a couple of moments. He closed his eyes enjoying the fullness and the weight on him. This was the ultimate proof that everything was indeed real, that he hadn’t dreamt the last two days. Opening his eyes again he met Harry’s emerald ones, looking down on him with so much love. He smiled knowing that here, like that, he was truly complete.

Taking it for a sign Harry began moving. Slowly at first, gently brushing his prostate in passing, then faster, more insistently, then slower again, prolonging their enjoyment. Severus could not help but notice that for someone who had been a virgin only the day before yesterday Harry was quite an accomplished lover, as if knowing on instinct what to do and how.

As if he was born to love me, Severus nearly laughed out loud at his own ridiculousness. It was just the bond between them providing the necessary knowledge of the other’s pleasure points and physical workings, nothing more, but still... He could clearly remember what Harry had said to him once, ‘as if this was meant to be’, and right now at least he was very much inclined to believe it.

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Severus woke up dully aching, strangely enough everywhere, but not there, even though their second coupling last night had been a bit rough. Well, at least it was proving the lubricant’s excellent quality. He groaned quietly, extricated himself from the still sleeping wizard and proceeded to the shower. The warm water would help to relax his tightly wound muscles.

He left the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his hips and started to rummage in his wardrobe in search of clean clothes. Harry was already awake and looking at him strangely.

“What?” Severus turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

“Your skin,” Harry was squinting at him in concentration. “Is it just the light or..?” he trailed off and summoned his glasses.

Severus raised his arms to look at them closer. His skin was no longer yellowish sallow, but rather a healthy cream colour, the same one Harry had actually, only several tones lighter. He stepped in front
of the full length mirror in the corner and lightened every lamp in the room with a word of command.

_Holy Mother of Merlin!_

This was amazing! He had always had such issues with it, always buttoned up to the last and so uncomfortable whenever he had to visit Madam Pomfrey. It had taken Harry ages to get him to accept that he really did not mind touching him in any way, on the contrary. Now though, he definitely wouldn’t have any such trouble! He ran his hands down his arms and chest and even dropped the towel to make sure he was like that everywhere. Harry snickered and joined him in front of the mirror naked as well, turning on the spot several times, trying to find any changes of his own. Severus took a look at their both reflections and saw it immediately.

“You have grown!"

Harry froze and stared at him in disbelief, then turned to compare their height again, and indeed he seemed to be about three inches taller than only yesterday. He grinned broadly, apparently beyond pleased.

“You know, I suddenly don’t mind the discomfort all that much.”

Severus rolled his eyes, but the smile on his lips was betraying him. “You are saying that now, wait until the evening. It is supposed to get worse, before it gets better.”

“Such an optimist, aren’t we?” Harry skipped towards the bathroom in the best of moods.

Severus watched his swaying bottom until it disappeared behind the door and shook his head in amusement, then sighed contentedly and began dressing. Their breakfast of course was already set up and waiting for them in the dining room.

xxxoooxxx

The week had progressed in much the same routine. Unfortunately, Severus’ prediction had turned out to be correct and they began resorting to an excessive use of Glamours to hide their condition during the day. The New Order had congratulated them profoundly on the newly found marriage bliss, Hermione especially was ecstatic. And the best of it, he could attribute his tiredness to the honeymoon anytime she noticed something amiss. So all in all, no one had even the slightest suspicion so far.

Sunday evening found the newlywed couple curled up on the couch in front of the fire and for the first time in days not in pain or discomfort of any kind. There were only four days left until the rise of the full moon and the main bulk of the transformation was already behind them.

Harry was now sporting a proud 5’8”, which he had attributed to a belated growth spurt, he could tell however that Hermione was not quite buying it. His frame and limbs became longer and finer, his facial bones more pronounced. To his great satisfaction, his hair had actually straightened somewhat, but only somewhat. Potter genes were obviously as stubborn as their owners. The most important change had occurred to his eyesight though. It was slowly regenerating and was currently only half as bad as it had been a week ago. His glasses had needed to be adjusted almost daily, which was a nightmare in respect to his classes. Severus had to make several trips to the opticians’ in Hogsmeade in disguise to have them brought up to date. Harry knew of course that his eyesight was too bad to regenerate completely, blasted Potter genes again. But to have it back even that far, was definitely an improvement he would have never hoped to achieve.

Severus had changed as well, though nowhere near as drastically as Harry of course. His skin could
only be described as fair now, his hair was a bit thicker and his frame and face fuller. These small changes though, had given him a hitherto unknown confidence in his looks. Personally, Harry had never found him as ugly as he had been making himself out to be. His nose of course was something that could not be helped, but it did fit well into his face, giving his features a noble, roman quality. His eyes and his voice on the other hand, could melt guts on the spot, if put to use a certain way, and his hair was fine and silky to the touch. He wasn’t classically handsome, though he was an attractive man in his own right. But you go try and get it through to the stubborn bastard! Harry was only glad that those stupid issues were finally over.

Harry shifted on Severus lap and slid down to the floor smirking naughtily when an interesting idea had entered his mind. He had told Malfoy once that they preferred the rug, truth was however that they had never done it anywhere beside the bed and it was high time to change that. He spread Severus’ knees and slithered himself in between them, opened his trousers and dragged them down all the way to his ankles, together with his black silk boxers. It had been a while since they had done something else beside anal as well.

Severus’ cock gave an interested twitch, while Harry was busy with his own trousers and slowly began swelling. Harry looked up into those unfathomably dark eyes and smiled at the hungry anticipation in them. He absolutely loved that feeling of being wanted, to know that his efforts were appreciated, and he was not much different from Severus himself in that respect, as deprived of affection as they both had been their entire lives.

He took their cocks into his hands and began stroking his own while working on Severus’ with his mouth, feeding on the sounds he was making like a man starved. Oh, how he loved his man like that! Moaning in pleasure and combing his long, slender fingers through his hair. He could swallow him whole! On second thought... he relaxed his throat and did just that.

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Since he was no longer applying any concealing charms, most of his colleagues had noticed Severus’ improved physical appearance at breakfast the following morning. And being the annoying gossipmongers as they were started speculating on it immediately. By the time he had entered the staffroom for their meeting that evening, he was in the mood to curse them all six ways to the next century. And Minerva’s all too knowing smirk wasn’t helping any! The last thing he needed would be the students to catch on to that on top of everything else.

He took his customary place next to Pomona and glared at them haughtily, as if daring someone to comment. Most of them were wise enough to keep their traps shut, Slughorn however had never been known for his wisdom.

“Ah, my boy, prowling the hunting grounds again I see,” he chuckled winking most annoyingly. “Seems to do you good indeed.”

Severus drew himself up ready to bite his head off, but seeing the others hold their breath out of the corner of his eye, decided not to give them the satisfaction.

“Some of us at least are still able to get any, Horace,” he drew his nose up sneering most contemptuously. “You are obviously not among them.”

Filius choke on his tea, while Pomona and Minerva among others were coughing suspiciously. Some were just gaping in shock. Slughorn however had turned a nice shade of puce, spluttering in embarrassment and indignation. Satisfied, Severus turned to face the Deputy Headmistress with a smug little smile playing on his lips and had to do a double take. Was that pride shining in her eyes? But before he could be certain, she turned away and cleared her throat to gain the staff’s attention.
“Shall we begin? Very well, Albus is going to be back on Friday. If there is still any trouble with the biting chalk, please take it up with him. The next Hogsmeade weekend is upon us and we are to patrol the village in pairs this time, one cannot be too careful nowadays.”

There was a wave of displeased murmurs.

“Why was it not cancelled entirely?” Charity asked frowning.

Minerva sighed. “Unfortunately, the Ministry is set upon maintaining a resemblance of normalcy as long as possible and Hogwarts is to set an example. Minister Scrimgeour has assured us that there will be ample security provided and we should not worry too much.”

Another wave of displeased murmurs followed, but since there was nothing to be done for it they continued with the individual problems. Severus pretended not to notice the speculative looks being thrown his way. It didn’t need a genius to know what they all were wondering about. Strangely enough, it didn’t annoy him even half as much as he had expected. Oh, if they only knew...

His gaze returned to Minerva. *Are you going to be proud of me still?* Somehow he doubted that. She had always been fiercely protective of her little lions. Should she find out that he had taken one of them to his bed, she would likely castrate him.

*Let us hope that I am no longer here when the news hit the fan then,* he smiled dryly to himself. He had done nothing wrong after all, even though most people would not see it that way. Imagining their pale, shocked faces was giving him an almost sadistic pleasure he had to admit, the Headmaster’s most of all.

*To hell with them and their self-righteous shit! I have won the greatest price of them all! I, Severus Snape, the nasty, ugly bat of the dungeons!*

And when the time came he would take great satisfaction in rubbing that into their faces.
Christmas

Harry was packing the last of his things with the rest of his smiling and joking dorm-mates, who were quite eager to go home for the Christmas holidays. He, Ron, Ginny and Hermione however, would take the Floo in the Headmaster’s office to get to Grimmauld Place right after breakfast. He was looking forward to settling in the Master bedroom tonight, even though Severus was not going to join him until tomorrow. Tonight on the twenty-second of December was the winter solstice, the night on which many seventh-years, Slytherin and otherwise, would show their true colours.

He smirked to himself while closing the lid of his trunk and shrinking it to put in his pocket. Oh, to be the fly on the wall when Voldemort realised that there would be less recruits than he had expected, a lot less actually. Those marked will not be returning next term of course. He sighed and turned to shrink Hedwig’s cage as well. It was really a shame that there would be any at all, so much lost youth and potential, no wonder Severus was upset.

On the brighter side, there was going to be a huge party on 25th. The Order had decided to go all out this year to raise troop morale or something. Well, looking at the progress of things they would certainly need it in the near future.

Harry wished Seamus and Dean a Happy Christmas and followed Neville down to the common room to meet up with the girls. Their organisation had acquired a wide circle of supporters by now. The number of the actual members however was still too small. It needed to change and soon. He didn’t know what Voldemort’s reaction to tonight would be, but he could tell without doubt that it wouldn’t be pleasant. They needed to gather more manpower and he had a few candidates already in mind.

Politics aside, his and Severus’ progress on the second bond was too slow for his tastes. Even though he had to admit that there was absolutely no way for it to go faster. To become one mind they would need to know the other intimately. And since both their lives were far from happiness and sunshine, unearthing those long suppressed memories was a slow and agonizing process. He often felt like he was lying on the couch in a shrink’s office! Though if looking at it a certain way, it might be exactly what he was doing, and maybe even exactly what they both needed.

Looking back with an objective eye, Harry had never realised just how fucked up his entire life had been. In Severus’ case it was even worse. Except rape there was really nothing that had not happened to him, and if not for the virgin’s magic he would likely not have been even that lucky. They both were in tears and emotional wrecks at the end of every session, feeling strangely lighter though, as if purging themselves of those unwanted burdens once and for all. On the other hand, it had brought them closer together than ever before. There was really no other person alive who knew either of them that well and therefore understood them to such an extent. There were times when Harry could tell what Severus was thinking just by watching him make a seemingly trivial gesture, and he knew that Severus could do the same.

Strangely enough, their sex life was not suffering from it, even though they tended to be gentler with each other than they usually would. Severus especially would often accuse him of treating him as if he were brittle. Harry however just could not bring himself to ram his cock into him after the things he had witnessed in his mind a mere hour or so before.

Breakfast in the Great Hall that morning was a rather boisterous affair. After they were done they took leave from Neville and Luna and trotted up to the gargoyle guarded entrance of Dumbledore’s office. Ron was trailing behind them, wisely keeping his distance, but since he was unfortunately still a member of the Weasley family there was nothing for it and they endured it with ill grace.
The Headmaster seemed to be in a disgustingly good mood for once, which made Harry immediately suspicious. Of what exactly though, he could not tell. It was just a gut feeling. They proceeded through the Floo and into the 12 Grimmauld Place kitchen for Mrs. Weasley to smother them to her content. After they were finally able to escape they split up to settle into their respective rooms. Ron did not say a word when Harry had passed him and the door to the room they had shared only last summer on his way to the next staircase, but it was obvious that he wanted to. Harry wouldn’t have cared either way to be honest. It wasn’t anyone’s business where he chose to sleep in his own house.

Winky had done a marvellous work on the bedroom in question or rather bedchamber, since room would not give it justice. Harry was strongly reminded of Severus’ quarters with the addition of a few complementary colours and knick-knacks he himself preferred. He could really feel at home here he decided looking everything over again, but first things first. He took out his ritual knife and proceeded to ward the rooms against any possible and impossible kind of intrusion. The last thing they needed would be for someone to barge in while they were in a compromising position.

At lunch the kitchen was packed with the usual assembly of Order members, most of them in a quite good mood. There had not been any attacks in the past few weeks, since Voldemort was likely saving it for tonight to bloody his newest followers properly. It was nothing to be happy about in Harry’s opinion, but since they did not know that, it was understandable. He and Hermione would descend into the dungeon afterwards to check on everything, while Ginny would be catching up with her mother and the rest of her family.

Harry lay awake that night tossing and turning for a while, before giving up on sleep entirely. He was missing his usual pillow, that much was clear. After sleeping with Severus every night for nearly two months he simply could not do without him anymore. He sighed deciding to use the time to ruminate about his current position. He supposed that it should disturb him how quickly everything had happened. The memories of his previous life felt like decades ago, when in truth it had been barely seven months. It did not though, on the contrary, everything seemed to make a strange sort of sense.

*It was meant to be,* Harry smiled wistfully. That sort of thinking was reminding him too much of Dumbledore’s firm belief into the power of love. Maybe, the old goat’s rumblings weren’t as farfetched as he had previously thought them to be.

The chamber doors to his far left opened just enough to let a slender shadow through, before closing soundlessly again. Harry smiled watching it approach silhouetted against the light of the lowly burning fire. Since the wards had not alerted him, it could be only one person alive.

“I thought you wanted to stay at Hogwarts tonight,” Harry raised his eyebrow in question.

“I have changed my mind.”

A moment later Severus was on top of him, kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

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The days before Christmas were spent in staying out of Mrs. Weasley’s way while she was busy with the last minute preparations. Severus usually left right after breakfast to check on his charges and other business, but would come back at night again. Harry smiled at the idea of waking up with his husband on Christmas morning and opening presents together. It was so domestic that Severus would likely sneer in disgust, even though Harry knew for sure that he would enjoy it very much. The second benefit coming from their sessions was that Harry didn’t have to wonder anymore what to give him. He had bought a good two dozen presents to spoil Severus with and was looking forward to see his scandalised face.
Hermione would leave on 25th after breakfast and use the cover of avoiding the party to go see Theodore. Harry felt with her, it must be really hard on both of them, but at least she did have someone. He was more concerned about Ginny. She was going out with Dean at the moment, though he could tell that it wasn’t going well. And even if it were, he doubted that it would end in anything serious anyway, since neither her father nor her great-uncle, the Head of House Weasley, would approve of the match. Ginny was the first Weasley girl in generations and was therefore to be married off well, to raise her family’s standing. Lord Weasley had gone out of his way to design a dowry high enough to tempt even the richest of purebloods. There was no way he would give her to a Dean Thomas.

Harry sighed shaking his head. He had already begun thinking like them, the Lords of this world, and yet he still had married Severus Snape without second thought. From the social point of view it was absolutely unthinkable. But he at least could afford to do that, Ginny on the other hand could not. She could disobey of course, but that would mean immediate disownment and even more disgrace for the Weasleys, and she loved her family too much to do that. No, she would bow to her Lord’s wished when the time came. The only thing Harry could do was to find her a respectable and wealthy man she at least could live with, and he himself as well.

He set the Defence book he was browsing aside and got up to get the “Self-updating Book of Names” he had seen in the genealogy section once. He had a bit of research to do.

Severus was woken far too early in his opinion, and by his husband’s childish acrobatics no less, which was doing nothing to lighten his mood. He grumbled annoyed and turned to the side pulling the covers over his head to shut out the light. However, it was not to be. The covers were ripped away from him and he was jumped by a green-eyed monster.

“Come on, Severus, up with you! It’s Christmas, presents are waiting!”

Any retort he might have had was sucked out of his mouth by the same monster, leaving him quite breathless.

“Happy Christmas!” And the weight pinning him down was gone.

Cursing under his breath Severs sat up and took a look around. Their rooms had been festively decorated overnight, though he had to admit, very unobtrusively so. His eyes widened when they finally landed on the obscene amount of wrapped parcels towering almost as high as the large tree in the corner.

“What in Merlin’s name is that?”

“Presents,” Harry chirped annoyingly happy and threw his dressing gown at him.

Severus caught it sending one of his best glares back. “I do realise that, imbecile. What I want to know is what that many of them are doing here.”

“Well, it obviously pays to have a lot of friends, does it not? Now get your arse over here, I want to start already!”

While he took his time getting out of bed and into his dressing gown, Harry began digging into the mountain, dividing it to two piles. Severus had to admit that he was intrigued. The pile that was apparently his was already bigger than what he had ever received before, and it wasn’t even the main bulk yet. As soon as he sat down on the floor Winky appeared before them, holding a tray full of hot
beverages and placed it on a low table she had conjured from the thin air.

“Hot chocolate, just like master Harry has required,” she announced proudly. “Do the masters wish anything else?”

“Thank you, Winky, I think we are all set,” Harry dismissed her grinning like a maniac at Severus’ turned up nose. As soon as she disappeared he took a random cup and shoved it into his hands. “And yes, you are going to drink it, it’s tradition!”

Severus was glaring at the cup as if it had offended him, debating with himself if he should give in or shove it up the meddling brat’s posterior. It did smell tempting though, and he could honestly admit that he did not remember how hot chocolate tasted. It had been too long since he was allowed or had allowed himself such frivolity. He looked up meeting Harry’s expectant gaze and decided to take a sip. One sip would not hurt him, would it?

He had to bite back a moan when the sweetness and the rich taste of chocolate exploded in his mouth. It was absolutely delicious! He took another sip watching Harry beam at him and take a cup himself, before ripping into the nearest parcel with an eagerness of a small child. Severus smiled at his antics and finished the cup, feeling its warmth seep to the very core of his being. Then, he turned his attention to the pile of presents awaiting him. If this was what they call married bliss, then he could live with it.

xxxoooxxxx

The party-goers started pouring in an hour before dinner and making themselves comfortable in the main ballroom with drinks and snacks. Harry was astounded to see how many people had free access to the Headquarters, since all of them were keyed into the wards by the secret keeper. Tonks, one of his newest recruits, informed him then that Dumbledore had decided to extend the Fidelius Charm to the entire family of every Order member in reaction to the recent wave of attacks. They would be able to bring their family to safety without his direct involvement in the case of an attack on their home. Most of these people didn’t know the exact location of the house itself and only Order members had the password to the Floo. Well, it was a good thing then that he had warded all his private areas so excessively.

The room was packed with laughing and chatting people by the time dinner was announced and they all began migrating to the main dining room. Harry was relieved to escape them for a while. He had been introduced to so many gushing husbands, wives, children and other entourage, whose names he didn’t even bother to remember, that he had developed a slight headache. He had sandwiched himself between the Weasley twins, securing someone fun to talk to for the duration of the meal, even though the people sitting across from them insisted on interrupting with stupid remarks.

Afterwards, most of them returned to the ballroom or spread onto the surrounding sitting rooms, forming small groups based on their age and interests. The New Order members plus a couple of other Hogwarts students had a lot of fun playing party games and testing the twins’ newest concoctions for the rest of the evening, until Harry suddenly began feeling a bit horny. He was shifting restlessly with steadily increasing arousal, but didn’t say anything, suspecting one of the twins’ pranks at work. During the next hour he noticed a radical sharpening of his sense of smell and taste, making it absolutely unbearable to sit among all these hormonal teenagers. Discreetly casting a Glamour on his crouch he got up and excused himself for the rest of the evening. He needed his husband and he needed him NOW!

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Dumbledore was talking pleasantly in the circle of his old friends, feeling quite satisfied. It was
almost two hours since Harry had left the party to seclude himself in the study right behind them. And the charms he had cast, before manoeuvring all these people into position around the entrance, had indicated that there were two humans inside and neither of them was virgin. Originally, he had planned to confront the boy alone, but then had decided to include witnesses. There was no absolute guarantee that Harry would yield to his influence, more pressure therefore wouldn’t hurt.

It was time to act. He turned the conversation to the speech the boy had given on behalf of the Minister’s integration campaign for the nonhuman magical citizens and sent one of the young people milling around to fetch Mr. Potter for them. The young man returned telling them that Harry was nowhere to be found.

“Well then,” Dumbledore smiled indulgently and pulled his wand out of his sleeve. “Point me Harry Potter.”

The wand on his outstretched palm turned sharp left pointing at the closed door next to him.

“Oh, how fortunate,” he walked over and rapped gently on it well aware of the eyes following his every move. “Harry, my boy, may I come in?”

He turned the doorknob, which unsurprisingly did not yield. Feigning surprise he frowned and stepped back, casting a revealing charm. The door lit up in a myriad of colours indicating excessive warding, which caused a disturbed murmur all around. Dumbledore had to bite back a smile, frowning deeper instead. He dismantled the wards carful to neutralise the alarm triggering nodes, before bringing them down and throwing the door wide open, lighting the lamps inside with a word of command.

The sight before him however was not the one he had expected. There was no girl squealing in fright and embarrassment and jumping up to cover herself, followed by the equally embarrassed Saviour of the wizarding world. No, there on the black leather couch lay Severus Snape with Harry Potter on top of him, both of them sweaty and naked, and quite flushed, apparently still basking in the aftermath of their coupling.

All blood drained from Dumbledore’s face. No, Merlin! Please no! This just cannot be!

Unfazed by the shocked gasps and exclaims of surprise coming from the gathered audience in the other room, Harry summoned Severus’ cloak to cover them both and raised his head to watch them all calmly, as did the man underneath him.

“Has no one ever taught you to not barge into warded rooms that are obviously warded for a reason?” Harry addressed them with a slight smirk. “Now, if you would excuse us. My husband and I wish to be alone.”

With a wave of his hand the door slammed shut right before Dumbledore’s nose.
Harry and Severus took their time redressing in silence. The damage was done and there was nothing else to do, but to go out there and face the music. They both had known that this would happen sooner or later and had therefore discussed the procedure at length. Step one, put on the rings; step two instruct Winky to have the copies of the engagement and marriage contract ready when called again; step three have an escape route ready, if everything went to hell. Harry was going to speak for them both, not only because he was the dominant partner, but also to avert any accusations of wilful seduction on Severus’ part.

When they were presentable Harry turned to Severus with a sly little smile on his lips, only to be met with a similar expression. Despite the unpleasantness, they both would have a lot of fun fucking with people’s minds tonight. An activity they both enjoyed almost as much as sex, but only almost. Severus nodded his readiness and put on a neutral mask. Following his example Harry opened the door and stepped out into the spacious sitting room, packed with agitated witches and wizards.

*My, the news travel fast!*

As soon as they were spotted the questions began to fly, until the Headmaster cast a Sonorus on himself and called them all to order.

*And so the show begins.*

Dumbledore turned to them with a face hewn in stone, though his eyes were betraying the anger boiling behind it. “I must say I am beyond shocked and disappointed. Severus, Harry, your actions tonight are not only deplorable, they are highly illegal and will therefore have severe consequences.”

Harry raised an eyebrow unimpressed. “Since when is taking pleasure in one’s husband an illegal action, may I ask? Well, doing so in public is deplorable I suppose, though it was hardly our fault. We have warded the room carefully. You were the ones forcing your way in without forewarning.”

The room exploded in cries of disbelief.

“SILENCE!” Dumbledore bellowed, before addressing them again. “So, you insist on trying to throw sand in my eyes with a couple of hastily conjured rings?” he pointed at their wedding bands disdainfully. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that the Heir of House Potter and Black would offer anything beyond his bed to a man so far below him? I was not born yesterday, young man!”

“The true value of a man is not measured on his wealth or standing,” Harry’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Severus has everything I always wanted in a partner for life, but that’s beyond the point. You want to see the contract papers? Winky!” The elf appeared holding a stack of copies. A snip of her fingers and every person present had one. “Thank you, Winky, you may go.” She bowed and disappeared with a soft pop. “There you are,” Harry smirked surveying the excitedly murmuring crowd.

*Merlin, they are really just a bunch of sheep, aren’t they? No wonder Dumbledore has such an easy time manipulating them.*

His gaze returned to the Headmaster’s pale face. He was reading the papers carefully, searching for loopholes no doubt. Harry knew though that he would not find any and could almost predict his next move. He wasn’t disappointed.

“Well, Severus,” Dumbledore folded the parchments and put them away in his robe pocket, “I must
congratulate you on your admirable ruthlessness. Seducing a boy half your age and persuading him to marry you right under my nose was a cunning move indeed.”

The crowd reacted predictably indignantly. Harry had a hard time not to sneer at them.

Severus just rolled his eyes unfazed. “Please, Albus, with the way he was throwing himself at me there was hardly any seduction involved.”

“Hey, with the way you were bending over, showing off that arse of yours, were you honestly expecting me to not get interested?”

“I was just picking up something.”

“Sure, you were.”

The sheep drew in a collective breath staring at them in absolute shock. Tonks and the Weasley children, minus Ron, were snickering in a remote corner. And Harry could have sworn to have seen McGonagall’s lips twitch, despite her stern expression.

Dumbledore spluttered for a moment, before clearing his throat and assuming a serious tone again. “No matter the actual circumstances, you are still a minor, Harry. Any non-platonic relationship conducted with an adult before your turning of age is therefore illegal.”

“With the sole exception of a formal courtship, Headmaster, as you well know,” Harry put in without missing a beat, “and since all guidelines and regulations have been observed to the letter, there is nothing illegal or even improper in our premarital relationship. Besides, we have been very discreet, which we actually didn’t have to be.”

Fighting a lost battle and knowing it Dumbledore grasped at one last straw. “There is still the improper teacher/student behaviour to consider. From a prefect and a member of my staff I have definitely expected better.”

“That may be, but it does not change the regulations concerning formal courtship between adults and minors, Albus,” Severus drawled in his usual manner. “The school bylaws do not make a distinction between students and members of staff in that respect, and yes, I did look up beforehand.” He pursed his lips in amusement. “I do not see why you are so upset. As Harry has already mentioned, we have been very discreet, have we not? And we will continue to be so.”

The exchange was followed by a new wave of agitated murmurs. Having had enough of that for one evening, Harry decided that it was time to make an exit.

“Well, if that was all,” he grabbed Severus’ hand, “we would like to retire now. It was a long and exiting evening indeed.”

The noise increased considerably all around them, though no one had dared to stop them when they pushed through the people blocking the entrance and proceeded down the hall and out of sight.

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With the Master bedroom door closed and locked behind them, they were finally able to exhale and relax somewhat. Severus felt strangely elated and anxious at the same time. It was hardly over yet. In a day or two at most the news would hit the papers and the greater part of the wizarding world would scream for his blood. On the other hand, he was looking forward to it, to gloat openly into his colleagues’ faces, Dumbledore’s in particular, and into the faces of all those who had always despised and ridiculed him. He knew he would be called names, he had been called names his entire
life, but this time it would be out of envy.

Harry chuckled and took him in his arms. “Did you see their faces? Oh, man...” he shook his head. “Hermione is going to kill me.”

“Yes, and Minerva and Molly are going to kill me, not to mention the hordes of your loyal fans.”

Harry groaned thumping his head against Severus chest and sighed in resignation. “I’ve forgotten about those, sorry love.”

“I will manage,” Severus kissed the crown of his head and led him towards the bathroom. “We should get some sleep, tomorrow is going to be a long day. On the brighter side, we could request family quarters now.”

Harry grinned at the prospect. “No need to sneak around for a shag anymore you mean?”

“Exactly. Now get yourself into that shower, brat!”

They went down to breakfast together the next morning and as expected, the interrogation committee was already present. During the meal only general questions had been asked, afterwards Minerva demanded to speak to Severus alone though.

He really did not know how to feel about it. She was one of the few people at Hogwarts and in general, who he genuinely respected. Her opinion meant a lot to him and her approval even more. And in the face of recent revelations he could well imagine that she was not at all happy with him. Whatever she had to say, it would be hardly pleasant, and he also knew that it would hurt. Bracing himself mentally he secured the sitting room against all sorts of eavesdropping and took seat on the couch opposite her, stiff as a rod and expression unreadable. Minerva as always got down to business immediately.

“Is he treating you well, child?”

Severus jaw dropped and his eyes widened in disbelief. He spluttered fumbling for a response, while Minerva got up and took a seat next to him, placing her hand on his arm, her face full of concern.

“I know it is a very prestigious match for you and far more than you could have ever expected. And I know that he is a good and honourable man. But he is also awfully young, inexperienced in the ways of the world, not to mention in the matters of heart. Will he be able to give you what you need? To love you the way you deserve to be loved? To make you happy?”

Severus was staring at her completely undone. Never, not in a hundred years, would he have expected that. He had prepared himself to endure her anger and disgust, and whatever threats or accusations she might throw at him. And all she was concerned about was his welfare? This could not be right. She must have simply hexed him out of his mind the moment he had stepped through the door. That at least would make sense!

Minerva smiled, as if reading his thoughts. “Do not misunderstand me, child. I have more than a few words to say on the matter of you grabbing yourself a boy half your age, and one of my favourites no less, but I am also well aware that you are in a greater danger to end up with a broken heart than him. He is young, he will bounce back; you on the other hand will shatter irreparably.”

Severus opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again and looked away. She was right of course. If he had not known for sure how much Harry loved him, he would have been in danger indeed. But
he did know for sure, he was seeing it in Harry’s eyes and feeling it in his touch every moment they
had spent together alone since the first bonding. Harry had even told him once. True, he had not
done that again, but he had not really needed to either. Severus knew without doubt as it was.

He cleared his throat nervously while trying to come up with the right words to properly express
what he wanted to say. It was not often that he was lacking in eloquence and the additional
embarrassment was not helping any.

“I do appreciate your concern, Minerva, but it is completely unnecessary. Neither Harry nor I have
entered this relationship blindly.”

Minerva would not give up easily though. “Do you love him?”

“Yes,” he forced through his teeth feeling the colour rise in his cheeks.

“And does he feel the same?”

“Yes,” he stated forcefully turning to face her.

Her eyes were searching his for confirmation and apparently finding it, she nodded once in
acceptance.

“Very well,” her demeanour changed from concerned to indignant faster than he could blink.

“Severus Snape, what were you thinking? To take an innocent boy to your bed, and one of your
students to boot! I am going to chop off your balls and nail them on the wall!”

Severus cringed at the volume of her voice, but could not help the smile playing on his lips. It was a
good feeling to know that there was someone beside Harry who cared.

xxxoooxxx

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley was wailing as if someone had died and smothering Harry
at the same time. How he was too young to make such life altering commitments and should have
consulted someone beforehand. Or that he should have chosen someone his own age, or at least
someone more suitable for a young man in his position, or someone less dark and jaded, and so on
and so on. Harry endured it stoically, while the rest of the Weasley children, minus Ron, were giving
him sympathetic looks. It was better than the dodgy questions Moody had been throwing at him. If
he had not known better, he would have said that he was trying to dig up something incriminating.

Ron was sitting at the far end of the table and munching on his toast with a dark expression. Harry
knew that there would be a heated conversation between them before too long, at the end of which
wands would be drawn. Too bad for Ron of course, he would have to learn to keep his unwanted
opinions to himself. The hard way if necessary.

Mrs. Weasley had finally run out of things to lament and let go of him. Harry suppressed a sigh of
relief and returned to his now lukewarm tea. Professor McGonagall entered the kitchen with Severus
in tow, who was apparently still alive and whole, and announced their departure to Hogwarts for the
rest of the day. Feeling rebellious after the circus he had been forced to bear with, Harry stood up to
give him a proper goodbye, or in other words to shove his tongue down his throat in the most
revealing way possible. Mrs. Weasley’s scandalised screeching was definitely worth the looks on the
faces of the Order members present.

Shortly before lunch a letter from Hermione arrived and judging by its thickness Ginny had already
debriefed her on the last night’s events and quite thoroughly. Harry sighed and unfolded what he
knew to be a long tirade on his recklessness, irresponsibility and overall foolishness. He was not
disappointed, but she also informed him that she had decided to stay at Nott manor for the rest of the holidays and asked him to pack and send her the rest of her things. Harry called for Winky immediately. Packing had never been his strong point, much less a woman’s belongings. He handed the letter to Ginny, who was curled up in the chair next to him and reading her book far too studiously to be convincing. Women, no wonder I’m gay!

Hermione’s absence was finally discovered at dinner. Mrs. Weasley would have noticed earlier Harry supposed, if she weren’t so busy focusing on him and his oh so terrible fate. The explanation that she had decided to stay with her ‘fiancé’ did nothing to improve the matriarch’s spirits and the lecture on propriety and decorum that followed he really could have done without. But hey, at least she wasn’t harping on about Severus anymore. He had a hard time keeping his temper in check since she had started with that.

His restraint could not withstand the shouting match between Ginny and Ron he had walked in upon on his way to bed late that evening though. Ron had apparently broken into her room and found the letter from Hermione.

“YOU KNEW ALL THIS TIME!” Ron’s face was purple with rage when he threw the balled up piece of parchment to Harry’s feet. “HOW COULD YOU HAVE ALLOWED HER TO MARRY A SLIMY SLYTHERIN! HE’S A SON OF A DEATH EATER, FOR MERLIN’S SAKE! OH, BUT WAIT, I FORGOT THAT YOU’RE RATHER FOND OF DEATH EATER COCK YORSELF!”

Harry really did not know how he could be so calm when his blood was boiling in his veins. But all he did was to raise his wand and say two simple words, “Obliviate! Somnus!” and Ron tumbled to the floor unconscious. Ginny was staring at him in shock while he burned the letter, vanished the ashes and levitated Ron out of the room.

“Try and be a bit more careful in the future,” he addressed her calmly on his way out and closed the door behind him.

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He had disposed of Ron into his bed after changing him into pyjamas. The bloody moron would wake up disoriented in the morning, but would not remember anything beyond going to sleep that night as usual.

Harry was staring into the mirror hanging over the sink in the luxurious bathroom of his and Severus’ rooms. The image staring back at him was that of a very powerful young man. He had accepted that a good while ago. Now however he could add coldblooded and ruthless to it as well. The question was then, did he still like what he saw?

I do, he smirked mischievously and turned away. The Golden Boy was dead and this time for good. He opened the bathroom door to be greeted with the sight of his husband lying naked on the satin sheets of their bed and wanking leisurely.

“Finally,” Severus drawled silkily, “I thought you have drowned yourself in there.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Impatient, are we? Well, I believe a lesson is in order, Professor.”

His wand sprang into his hand and a moment later Severus’ arms were over his head and pinned to the bed by a binding spell. Before Severus even realised what was happening, Harry had stretched and lubricated himself magically, charmed the lubricant onto Severus’ rigid member and began slowly lowering himself onto it. Severus buckled and hissed in pleasure and surprise, and Harry
didn’t even bother to hide his smug smirk. Nothing worked better to put a cocky husband into his place than riding him into submission after all.
Gaining Perspective

The paper next morning did not contain what everyone had expected, namely the social scandal of the century. Dumbledore’s influence on his people had not lost its sway entirely yet. Though, both Severus and Harry knew that it was only a question of time until someone gave in to the greed or spite and snitched to the Prophet. Instead, there was actually positive news, despite the belated wave of attacks across the country. The little speech Harry had given months ago in Hogsmeade had obviously born some fruit, since in two out of three cases the attackers had been driven off with surprising ease.

Harry did not see anything surprising in it though. The Death Eater groups had consisted to at least a half of new recruits. But still, it had shown the average witch and wizard that the Dark forces were not as unstoppable as they had previously believed. Secondly, it had shown the freshly marked Death Eaters that their dreams of easy power and glory were just that, dreams, and the reality was not something they’d like. It would therefore not surprise him, if some came crawling back to them in a month or two. Severus would have a great time dealing with them no doubt.

He looked over to his husband and saw his lips twitch slightly, while he turned the page with deliberate slowness and could not help but smirk. Yes, he knew exactly what was on his mind. They would be ready for the second part of the Triple Union in a week or two. Severus looked up and after searching his face for a moment, gave an assenting nod, being able to tell what was on Harry’s mind just as easily. Yes, they were more than ready.

xxxooooxxx

Dumbledore was pacing his office driven by the restlessness that had refused to leave him for the last two days. His carefully laid out plans had gone pear-shaped in the most spectacular manner. It was a nightmare! What was the boy thinking to marry Severus Snape! Oh, well, he was only sixteen, so it was likely that his cock was thinking for him at the time. He stopped abruptly and smashed his fist on the desk in a fit of anger.

Ruddy Slytherin snake! I have trusted him! I should have known better. He is just like the rest of them, if not worse! He is the Head of that thrice-damned house for a reason after all!

The Headmaster resumed his pacing. Oh, he knew very well what it was all about. Petty revenge for being soon removed from the safety and comforts of Hogwarts, was it not? And being the true snake he was, Snape had decided to strike where it would hurt the most, in addition to bringing him the most personal gain.

Filthy, amoral piece of shit! To seduce a boy half his age, a minor and a student under his protection no less! ‘The rules of formal courtship were observed to the letter’, my arse. Does he seriously expect me to believe that?

Dumbledore stopped again and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Assuming that he could prove that the rules were not observed to the letter, Snape would get between three and six months in Azkaban; with Harry on his side it would unfortunately be only three. But even in that case, the bastard would still rot in prison for his crimes, if only for a short time. The Headmaster smiled nastily. Yes, that was exactly what he was going to do! It was his duty as an upstanding citizen and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, was it not?

For a moment he toyed with the idea of trying to convince Harry that Snape was only using him, but discarded it quickly. The boy was too arrogant and stubborn to even allow the thought that he was
being royally duped to enter his mind. Saddened, Dumbledore shook his head.

*Oh well, he will learn in time. The hard way unfortunately, but if he insists upon it, there is nothing to be done. Snape could have hardly planned to continue this game for all eternity after all, he does hate the boy too much for that.*

With a defined course of action in mind, Dumbledore sat down and allowed himself to finally relax. As soon as the news hit the papers he would do what needed to be done. Gaining control over Harry would have to wait for later.

**xxxoooxxx**

Draco Malfoy moaned and spilled himself into the incredibly talented mouth of the Hufflepuff girl working on him in a secluded side corridor of the mostly deserted castle. Now that was an excellent blowjob! And he did not hesitate to tell her so, watching her preen at the praise. Merlin, he didn’t even know her name, which was a first, even for him. He had found her bawling her eyes out over some stupid berk, who had dumped her right before departing home for the holidays ... *Honestly! And Daphne accuses me of being tactless...* and had decided to comfort her, being a prefect and all that. Well, if the berk had let go of that delicious, not to mention gifted piece of arse, then he really must be stupid.

They straightened their clothes and he watched her leave after a short goodbye kiss, definitely in a far better mood. He could well imagine that the berk was all but forgotten. He sighed wistfully and stepped out into the main corridor to continue his patrol. The blowjob had been good, almost as good as what Ginevra Weasley was capable of, but only almost.

Ever since Draco had returned to school, he had set out to actually earn his reputation and was admittedly surprised at the easiness with which sex without strings could be obtained within these ancient halls. He was sure that Pansy must already know of his tomcatting around and her indifference had only confirmed his suspicions about her. Trouble was however that he still could not decide as to whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and he still wanked at least once a day thinking of a certain redhead.

He stepped into the boy’s loo and made a beeline for the mirror. His hair and his uniform were atrociously mussed and he pulled his wand to remedy that. A Gryffindor would not have bothered no doubt, but for a Slytherin such an appearance was unacceptable, holidays or not. Presentable again he took a moment to examine the hollow feeling in his gut. He loved the casual sex, he really did, but could not help to notice that he felt empty afterwards. The giddiness and warmth filling him for weeks after his encounter with Ginny was absent and he was honestly afraid to contemplate what it could possibly mean. One thing was clear though, that he was missing it dearly and wanted it back.

Draco sighed heavily and returned to the silent corridor outside. If he was honest with himself, he knew exactly what it was he had felt at the time. The very same thing he was seeing in Severus’ eyes when he looked at Potter or in Potter’s whole face when he looked at Severus. That thing however was not for Malfoys. His father had told him that countless times, had he not? It did not make it any less desirable though, on the contrary. Was he denying himself in vain? He had looked at every girl on the market and had not found anything even remotely suitable, and he had only six months left.

He balled his hands to fists making a decision. He would persuade Ginny to visit that storage room again and should that feeling return, he would burrow himself balls deep in her, making her his bride, and cackle gleefully at the earthquake the many generations of Malfoys and Weasleys spinning in their graves would cause. Though he probably should talk to Potter first, just to make sure his endowments would stay unharmed afterwards. He doubted Potter would have much against the match, but one never knew.
The news did eventually hit the fan, on January the second, just on time for the denizens of the wizarding world to have slept off their inebriation and actually be able to take notice. The reaction of the media was surprisingly reserved. It was an announcement of a by all appearances legal marriage after all, even if a secret and socially improper one, and not a sordid affair. Secondly, they knew better now than to make any unfounded accusation or disparaging remarks on Harry Potter’s reputation, or that of his chosen spouse. The wizarding public was not that considerate of course and all sorts of owls began flooding Grimmauld Place before lunch was even over. Fortunately, the Howlers and any cursed letters were destroyed by the wards immediately. Harry and Severus had a lot of fun reading the rest.

There was a bit of everything actually, from sincere well-wishers, to politely concerned adults, to disappointed fans. Minister Scrimgeour, like many other highly placed Ministry officials, did send his formal congratulations, as did every single Head of House with the exception of the known Death Eaters. Not to do so would have been an unforgivable faux pas. Even some of Severus’ former associates had deigned to send him their congratulations on being such a shameless, self-serving bastard and selling his arse to move up in the world. Making it sound like a compliment though, to the couple’s unending amusement. His current associates were torn between being scandalised and supportive it seemed.

Severus had requested their own private quarters days ago, but the Headmaster had yet to approve. The old goat was obviously still peeved and probably scheming industriously away in that office of his. But well, if he had nothing better to do then so be it. The Deputy Headmistress would have allowed it in the blink of an eye, but they had wanted to rub it in the old man’s face. Until then Harry would simply have to move into Severus’ quarters. What a hardship, honestly!

Harry ran his hands over his husband’s fair skin with deliberate slowness. They would have to return to Hogwarts tomorrow and he found that the prospect of it no longer brought him the happiness it usually would. In fact, he was seriously considering dropping out of school in favour of private education come summer. He doubted however that Severus would have any of that, even if it would mean more alone time for them.

Sensing his morose mood Severus flipped them over and took matters into his own hands, and Harry was only too happy to let him. It had been quite a while since he had allowed himself to just lean back and enjoy. It was so liberating in many ways, no wonder Severus took to it so naturally. Being in control almost every minute of every day, it must be a great relief for him to be able to relinquish it to someone he trusted completely.

All sensible thought left his mind when Severus’ mouth descended on his straining member. “Oh fuck, yes!”

Harry’s hips buckled against his will, but were pushed back down by a heavy hand, without interrupting the pleasurable movements of lips and tongue. A slick finger was rubbing circles at his opening, before sliding inside almost effortlessly and starting to pry his hole open for more to follow. Harry was well aware that he was begging for it like a wanton slut, but could have given a shit if Severus would only hurry. Needless to say that the smug bastard never did.

The fingers brushing against his prostate were driving him mad, right to the point where he was threatening Severus with dismemberment, if he did not shove his cock in there this instant. And finally, finally he felt it breach his ring of muscle and slide into him to the hilt.

*Oh, yes, so good! Do you have any idea how good it feels, you bloody git? Of course you do, what a stupid question!*
“Now move! Fuck me!”

Severus chuckled pinning his squirming butt to the bed with his sheer weight. “Tsk, tsk, now what is this? Making demands, are we? We are on my schedule here, Lord Potter Black.”

“Please!”

“Ah, that is better,” Severus pulled almost all the way out before slamming right into his prostate with one fluid stroke.

Harry threw his head back howling in pleasure.

*Fucking hell!*

Severus did not give him time to recover, repeating the process over and over, though less forcefully, until Harry buckled and spilled himself without even being touched. Turning his half conscious form over Severus grabbed his hips and entered him again, before lifting him up into his lap, with his back pressed firmly against his chest. To his utter embarrassment it had actually taken Harry a couple of minutes to gather his wits enough to realise that he was being fucked again and start moaning and pushing back with abandon. Severus laughed at him and increased his pace.

*Bloody pompous bastard! You just wait until it’s my turn! I’m going to fuck you until you pass out and will still be fucking you when you wake up again!*

“Oh, yes, harder please!”

Severus wrapped his hand around Harry’s reawakened cock and obliged, bringing him to a second orgasm a couple of minutes later. Panting harshly from exertion he nibbled on Harry’s earlobe, giving him some time to calm down a bit, before resuming his assault on his prostate. It did not take long though, until he slammed into him one last time and spilled himself half groaning half shouting. If there was a sound Harry loved above all else, it would be that one. He loved it even more than the sound of Severus’ laughter, and that was saying something.

They collapsed to the side still joined and stayed like that for a good while, too lazy to move. But the cramp in their limbs and the itch of the drying spunk forced them eventually apart. Cleaned and arranged more comfortably Harry kissed his husband goodnight and drifted into sleep. He was happy, Severus was happy and their friends were happy for them, as far as he was concerned it was all what counted.

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Ginny lay sleepless in her bed late at night, wondering yet again what in the name of Morgana had possessed her. She and Harry had a long private talk today. Somehow she was not at all surprised that he had decided to interfere in the matter. She was the only one in their circle of friends without a committed love interest and it was simply in his nature to take care of everyone close to him, as far as he was able to, and she was grateful for it. Her great-uncle had started exerting more pressure lately, demanding that she end her relationship with Dean as soon as possible, since it was apparently hindering her from coming together with a respectable suitor. How he had learned about it in first place, she had no idea. No doubt Ron must have snitched on her.

She sighed heavily. She would obey of course, what else was she left to do? Her family’s expectations were resting on her narrow shoulders and she could not let them down. She had been raised from childhood on to become a rich pureblood’s wife and a rich pureblood’s wife she would become one day, sold to the highest bidder turning up.
And Harry did understand that of course and also the unfairness of it all. That was why he had asked her a question no one else had asked her before. If she could choose herself a husband among those fitting the criteria her Head of House required, who would she take? Well, she had blurted the name out without a moment’s hesitation, almost dying from embarrassment as soon as it had left her mouth. It was so mortifyingly juvenile, but also true, there was really no one else she could have thought of. He was handsome and had shown a strong will, honour and a good character. He was still an arrogant bastard, but so were most of the other possible suitors, so there was nothing for it.

Harry had stared at her for a good minute with both eyebrows in his hairline, but then smirked slyly and said that he would see what he could do. Ginny honestly did not know what to think of it, but if he somehow miraculously managed to arrange it then who was she to complain. She was sorry for Dean though. He of all people did not deserve to be treated like that. It was all her own fault really. If she had not been so obsessed with getting one over on Michael at the time, she would have never agreed to go out with him. But she could also admit that they had quite a nice time together, trying out a lot of new wicked things she would have never allowed Michael to do. Needless to say that Michael had not taken the news too graciously.

Ginny smirked to herself. It looked like she could be a bitch too, if she put her mind to it. Nothing to be ashamed of.
Everyone's Five Knuts

Albus Dumbledore was positively fuming. He was not used to not being taken seriously, or outright thwarted in whatever he wanted to do. His concerns about the legitimacy of the Potter/Snape match were met with either deaf ears or open disregard. Scrimgeour had told him to his face that he gave a shit, verbatim if one could believe it, since there was obviously no harm done and he had better things to do than pursuing people’s bedroom affairs.

No harm done my arse!

What about the reputation of this school and its staff? He was pelted with Howlers and letters of concern from parents and students alike, not to mention members of the Board of Governors, almost every day. Well, most of the later were Voldemort’s supporters, but still, he couldn’t simply ignore them!

After leaving Scrimgeour’s office he had gone straight to Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Law Enforcement, believing that the stern and painstakingly impartial woman would jump on the opportunity to do justice as she usually would, even in the face of resistance from the higher-ups at the Ministry. And she had listened very interestingly at first. That was until she had asked him what evidence he had for his accusations. Apparently, saying that he was expecting anything less from an ex-Death Eater and that he just knew it was not enough, even though he had given her his word. ‘I simply can’t issue an arrest warrant based on speculation, Albus, you must give me something more substantial.’

Well, she was right of course, he knew that himself. But it did not prevent him from cursing her and her stubbornness in every language he knew. Did she not see that the crime was absolutely evident in and of itself? If Snape were to be arrested, he could be interrogated under Veritaserum and then she would have her evidence. But no, she needed the bloody evidence first! How in the name of Merlin was he supposed to bring it in, if the use of any truth potions was restricted to open investigations only and the stupid bint had refused to open the case?

Dumbledore sighed heavily. He would think of something, he absolutely must!

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“You knew,” it was not a question, but rather a statement of fact with a slight tint of accusation coming out of Blaise’s mouth. Daphne did not comment, watching them intently instead.

Draco suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. They were sitting in their usual spot in the common room, which had been lively abuzz ever since the return of the main student body. Such a level of excitement in the Slytherin common room had been registered only once in his day, namely when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened.

“He’s my godfather and we are close, of course I knew,” he smirked slyly. “It’s not like they’ve been subtle about it.”

His friends were unimpressed. “Is there any other life upsetting information you would deign to share with us perhaps?”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Have you been approached?”

Admittedly, to ask a fellow Slytherin something like that was not only improper, but also quite dangerous. He was positive though that they wouldn’t mind.
“No, we were not,” was the calm response.

And then it hit him. His most trusted childhood friends must have been wary of him almost all their lives, expecting him to pledge loyalty to the Dark Lord and drag them into the fold with him. And they would have followed him, either out of helplessness or because they trusted him as a Malfoy to choose the winning side. When the time came however, he had done something utterly unthinkable, shrugged off everyone’s expectations as if it were nothing and chose to go his own way.

*I’m independent! And there is power in it, great power actually!*

A power the value of which his father would never appreciate nor understand. Ironically enough, it was exactly the sort of power which was his very birthright as a Malfoy and which he had thrown away so carelessly.

*I took back what is mine!*

Draco was grinning like a maniac inside, while pride he had never felt before was swelling in his chest. He had achieved the first true accomplishment of his life, all on his own. But back to Daphne and Blaise. They were hanging in the air right now, not knowing what to think, much less what to do, or who to trust. He needed to gain them for himself, so he could present them to Potter when the time came. He expected it to be any day now, he was aware of his own value after all. Potter would be truly stupid to pass him up.

He leaned back in his chair and relaxed. “I’ve known the Dark Lord not to be a desirable Master to pledge loyalty to for quite a while. Severus likes me and has therefore always tried to counteract my father’s conditioning to the best of his ability without being too obvious. Needless to say that he was successful,” he smirked wistfully. “I’ve yet to ask him, but I suspect that he has changed sides even before I was born.”

His friends were looking at him as if seeing him for the first time, and maybe they did. Draco found that he did not mind, on the contrary, it was very liberating to just say what was on his mind without the usual subterfuge.

“However, since there was no real alternative available until recently, I’ve been doing my best to conform to my father’s wishes. That was until I’ve met the Dark Lord and his trusted followers personally this summer,” he changed his expression into a grimace, not really having to feign it though. “Trust me, anything is better than serving that... thing, even running away to hide on the streets among muggles.”

The absurdity of that statement coming out of *his* mouth seemed to do the trick and their brows furrowed in serious thought. Draco suppressed a triumphant smirk. It was time to go for the kill.

He sighed and stretched his legs out crossing them at the ankles. “Independence is a fine thing I can tell you. The freedom of thought and movement is unrestricted in any way, but it’s also tiring after a while. I’ve been doing nothing but sitting on my bun and enjoying it these past couple of months. I’m bored out of my mind!”

Blaise was eying him warily. “And what are you going to do about it?”

He shrugged with a nonchalant smirk. “What Malfoys always do when they are bored, striving to gain money, power and position of course. And I believe I’ve got just the right idea as to how.”

He grinned at their half hopeful half afraid expressions. “Don’t worry, true Malfoys always choose the winning side. It’s time to remind my dear father of that.”
Honestly, they are almost too easy!

Thursday the 9th of January found Harry and Severus in the Chamber of Secrets again. Choosing Severus’ birthday for the second bonding had been a short term decision, but an excellent one nonetheless. It was in every way a truly significant date, because of its personal value, but also in terms of magic, since it consisted of arithmantically powerful digits only. Beside that, Severus would turn 37, a very powerful constellation as well. It was like the day was perfectly designed just for their use, and considering everything else that had happened to them Harry would have not been surprised if it were actually the case.

It was quite lucky too that Severus had been born in the late afternoon and they wouldn’t have to miss any of their classes. If everything went well, no one would be the wiser. The ritual itself would take an hour or two at most and did not require any extensive preparations beforehand, since the contact would be purely mental. They would connect through Legilimency and exchange the substance of their minds. Not just copy for copy though, but actually through personally reliving the other’s life in their head, making every single experience the other had ever made their own.

And that was why it was so dangerous. If you couldn’t take what the other had learned and experienced, you would simply go insane. Just like any normal person would when exposed to something they were unable to deal with. The consequence of a successful bonding would be a noticeable change of their respective personality. One simply couldn’t make a whole life worth of experience and not change accordingly. Harry only hoped that it would be nothing too drastic. It would be hard to explain to their friends and peers otherwise.

Hermione and maybe even Draco would notice something amiss with them immediately though, that was why they had decided to finally reveal their little secret to the New Order after today. Concerning Draco Harry had his own plans, which he had yet to share with his husband. Though, in an hour or two he would know anyway, so no great hurry there.

Severus had been very worried on his behalf these past couple of days and understandably so, since he was the older and more jaded of the two of them. But Harry was quite positive that he would be able to handle it. Thinking about it, he doubted there were someone more capable to take on the heavy baggage that was Severus’ life than him. His own life had made him a though bastard and after today he would be only tougher. If he was honest with himself, he could hardly wait. He would be the one to gain the greater profit out of this exchange after all. The price was hefty, but the skill and knowledge he would gain were well worth it in his opinion, especially because he would no longer have to study that much anymore.

Besides, there was another and very personal issue that would be resolved today as well. Harry was every bit as much self-conscious about his intellectual deficiencies as Severus had been about his looks. From this day on he would be able to consider himself Severus’ equal, and that he truly could barely wait for.

They took the potion that would prevent them from blinking and also keep their eyes from drying out, and sat down cross-legged opposite each other, breathing evenly in and out. When the bell announced the hour of Severus’ birth their eyes connected and so did their entire lives, making them one once again.
looking around still somewhat disoriented. Harry lay next to him, his green eyes open and empty. Severus’ heart constricted in fear before jumping into his throat, nearly choking him, until his mind finally kicked in and reassured him that Harry was not dead, only unconscious. He let out the breath he was holding and berated himself for his moment of stupidity. Of course Harry would be still out cold. His brain would have a lot more information to process after all, twice if not thrice as much as Severus’ had received. He would wake up soon.

*If he still has a sane consciousness to wake up to that is, Severus shook his head to rid himself of that thought. Harry is strong, he will manage, full stop!* 

He took the antidote and even spelled some into Harry’s stomach to make him close his eyes. Then, transferred Harry to the bed and sat down in a chair next to it to wait. His Tempus had shown him eight o’clock, long past dinner, though he doubted that he would be able to stomach anything right now. To get a grip on his anxiety, he decided to use the time to go through the landscape of his mind and reshape it to fit his new awareness of himself and the world in general. Harry’s life experience had added quite a few aspects to his personality it hadn’t had before, like optimism, lightness of heart and mind and the ability to relate to people no matter their standing. Who would have thought that he would be capable of these things one day? He himself definitely hadn’t.

It was long past midnight when Harry had finally stirred or rather groaned and curled up into a foetal position, trembling violently. Severus jumped up and ran a health-scan over him, just like he had been doing every hour. It didn't show anything amiss though.

“Harry? Harry, can you hear me?”

Harry’s head snapped up and seeing Severus lean over him he pulled him down on the bed, clinging to him with all his might.

“Oh, Sev,” he sobbed into his shoulder. “Sev, I’m sorry! I’m such a bastard! I love you, I really do, don’t you ever doubt that... you are wonderful you know... and they all are scum on earth! Your father and those Slytherins, and Dumbledore, and James and Sirius too... they had no right... no right to do that, to say those things... it’s not fair!”

“Shh, it is okay Harry,” he wrapped his arms around his husband protectively. “It was a long time ago. I have you now.”

Harry nodded into his chest, slowly calming down and relaxing his death grip somewhat. “I love you.”

Severus couldn’t help but chuckle at that. “Yes, you have said so already I believe.”

“Not often enough apparently.” Harry grumbled and sighed heavily cleaning his face and Severus’ robes with a mere thought. “A useful trick that,” he commented raising his head to look into Severus’ eyes.

“Indeed,” onyx eyes were searching his face carefully. “Are you alright?”

“No, but I will be.”

Severus nodded accepting that and transfigured their clothes into pyjamas, before pulling the covers over them both. “Then, let us sleep. It is late enough and we will have to rise early tomorrow, if we want to hold up appearances.”

Harry collected his kiss goodnight and snuggled into him comfortably, though it was quite clear that neither of them would find rest tonight. There was simply too much on their minds. Very literally.
Feeling slightly unwell on Friday afternoon Minerva McGonagall decided to go by the hospital wing after her last class. And when she was at it, to ask Poppy’s opinion on those new health care potions advertised in the Witch Weekly’s latest edition. And as it was usually the case, the two women got carried away with catching up on the latest gossip. Minerva had just finished retelling the events of the Order’s Christmas party and took a sip of her tea, watching the woman opposite her frown thoughtfully. Poppy was not a member, but she was involved deeply enough, due to providing medical care more often than not.

“I do not know, Minerva, this whole business stinks mightily, if you ask me.”

“How so?” she raised an eyebrow genuinely curious.

“Did you know that Albus has gone to a great length to withhold information on the importance of sexuality in the wizarding world from Mr. Potter? Whatever he has done that for could hardly be anything good, especially in the light of what you have just told me.”

Minerva stared at her in shock. “Merlin’s beard, what was he thinking? Are you sure?”

“Of course,” the matron huffed rolling her eyes. “I have given the boy the Talk mere months ago, at his own request. He has not had a clue until then, can you believe it? Anyone could have taken advantage of him in the meantime.”

Hit by a sudden thought Minerva sat up straighter. “You think Severus...”

“Great Merlin, no, the other way around, if anything! I’d wager Potter began planning to seduce and marry Severus the moment I have told him about the unbreakable bonds. And do not look at me like that! Even you must have noticed by now how calculating and ruthless he has become.”

“Yes, I have noticed,” Minerva conceded thoughtfully. “But Severus has assured me that Harry loves him.”

“Ah, but that is exactly my point! Potter wanted him and Potter took what he wanted, propriety and social expectations be damned. That he was spitting Albus in the face in the process must have been just the cherry on top.”

“I must admit that it does make sense, if put that way. But what has the Christmas party and Albus to do with it?”

“Minerva, do you not see?” Poppy sounded exasperated. “Albus must have set the whole thing up to expose Potter for whatever reason. Though, I can well imagine that he has expected to see him on top of some girl instead of Severus Snape,” she added wryly. “Oh, to have been there and seen the look on his face!”

“You know, I have been too busy staring at Harry’s bare arse at the time and cannot remember either. How about we take a look again in that Pensieve of yours?” Minerva suggested with a wicked glint in her eye.

Poppy chuckled gleefully and dove for the secret drawer of her desk. “Well, girl, you may be Gryffindor, but you have always had the best ideas.”
“You have done WHAT?” Harry, Severus and even Theodore cringed at the volume of Hermione’s voice. “HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND? YOU COULD HAVE DIED OR WORSE, GONE INSANE FOR REAL!” She rounded on Severus, “AND YOU HAVE GONE ALONG WITH THAT MADNESS?”

“Hermione, please, calm down,” Harry was trying to placate her, though not very successfully. “We’ve the second bond down already and everything went well as you can see…”

“That doesn’t mean ANYTHING!”

“Well, yes, but the chances of a failure are quite small now, don’t you think? We are obviously very compatible and…”

“Don’t you try and put wool over my eyes, Harry James Potter, I know EXACTLY what the Triple Union is! It’s a miracle that both of you are still alive!”

“But we are, and that’s the point! We’re not only alive and well, we’re more powerful than ever!”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Is that all what that’s about? Gaining power?”

“Well, yes actually…”

“YOU ARE RISKING YOUR MAGIC, YOUR SANITY AND EVEN YOUR LIVE TO GAIN POWER?”

Harry bristled at that, stayed calm on the outside though. Only two days ago he would have been on his feet and shouting back in her face already. Now however, with additional twenty years of life experience on his side, he could watch her raging in an almost detached manner. Borrowing one of Severus’ best lecturing tones he looked her directly in the eyes.

“My dear Hermione, must I remind you that Voldemort is not going to wait a decade or two for me to gain it the conventional way. As a matter of fact, I sincerely doubt he’s planning to allow me to come of age in the first place. I simply can’t afford anything else, if I want to not only survive, but also end this war sometime in the foreseeable future,” he hissed the last part through clenched teeth, betraying just how angry he truly was.

“Oh,” Hermione blinked at him sheepishly. “Well, if you put it like that…”

Theodore snickered next to her shaking his head. “Honestly, love, you have this annoying habit of getting carried away.”

She turned to him with an evil glint in her eye pursing her lips wryly. “Really? You didn’t seem to mind only last night. But if it irks you that much, I’ll try to refrain next time of course.”

Anger forgotten Harry joined Severus in grinning at Theo’s crestfallen expression. They really were like an old married couple sometimes.

Hermione eyed them carefully. “Well, it does explain a lot actually. Growth spurt, honestly, did you really believe I’d buy that? I was worried sick thinking that you have resorted to Dark Arts to change your appearance à la Voldemort, just so you know.”
Harry’s eyebrows disappeared in his hairline. “You actually believe me capable of going that far?”

“Of course,” she answered without the slightest hesitation. “There’s hardly anything I wouldn’t put past you nowadays to be honest. You are certainly capable of both the best and the worst. Under the right circumstances, who knows what you’d do? I for one wouldn’t bet on anything.”

“But that is exactly what makes him the Lord of Dusk and Dawn. He is shifty and unpredictable, and not bound to any expectations people might have,” Severus commented putting his hand on Harry’s thigh.

“Just great, am I supposed to take pride in that?” Harry sneered sarcastically. “My own family doesn’t know me anymore.”

“Oh Harry, I didn’t mean it like that,” Hermione put in immediately. “Of course I still do know you. What I wanted to say is that you’re no longer an open book for everyone to read, and that’s a very good thing actually.”

“Right,” Harry crossed his arms unconvinced.

Severus chuckled at his stubbornness. “Well, if it gives you some comfort, your husband at least will always be able to tell how you would react in any given situation.”

“Thank you, my love, it’s good to know indeed,” Harry smiled and attached himself to his mouth in a quite indecent way.

Hermione and Theodore exchanged looks and rolled their eyes. “Get yourselves a room, would you.”

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Draco was at his wits end as to what to do. Should he approach Potter first to ask permission or should he engage himself to Ginny and confront him with the inevitable later? And he wasn’t even sure, if he still would feel what he had back then or if she would accept him in the first place. On the other hand, he doubted that she would decline. He was the most eligible bachelor in Britain at the moment, since Potter was off the market, so he doubled that she would find anyone better. He was pretty sure that her heart was unengaged and since her break up with Thomas, she was free to be pursued by anyone.

He had noticed a decrease of interest in any other liaisons ever since the news had hit the grapevine and in turn, an increase of certain dreams with her in the lead. That was when he had begun stalking her most shamelessly, until the point where she seemed to have noticed. Just like he was doing right now, following her at a safe distance through the nearly empty halls of the castle, not caring at all that he would be late for his next class.

Suddenly, she made a sharp turn right and disappeared behind the corner of the nearest side corridor, a corridor he was quite sure would lead to a dead end. Heart thudding faster he swallowed and looked around. The hall was empty since it was only minutes before the bell, so he approached the aforementioned corned and peeked around. There was another turn at the far end and no Ginny in sight. Making a decision he pulled his wand and followed it to the end. He was barely there when he felt the light brush of privacy wards against his skin. But before he could even begin to consider what to do, he was grabbed by his tie and pulled inside them.

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Neither Ginny nor Draco had been seen ever since lunch.
Harry sat on the couch next to his husband and leisurely enjoyed his tea. The Marauder’s Map lay unfolded on the table before them.

“It looks like they have decided to take the matter in their own hands after all,” he could not help but smirk slyly. *Trust Ginny to lose patience.*

“Indeed, Draco is not known to be the most patient either. They will do well together.”

“Are you reading my mind again?”

Severus rolled his eyes for the hundreth time that evening. “How often must I tell you that it does not work that way? I do not need to read your mind to know what you are thinking. It is not telepathic!”

“Thank Merlin for that.”

Severus was about to roll his eyes yet again, but stopped himself at the last moment.

“He will have to be included into the New Order as soon as possible, and do not even start with your usual lecture now. In his case it just cannot be optional. He is a Malfoy and as such, his whole way of thinking differs from what you are used to in normal people. He simply will not accept any other terms than those of a strong hand.”

“I know that, thank you very much,” Harry sounded exasperated. “You’ve been so kind to bestow your eternal wisdom on me, remember?”

“Forgive me, old habits die hard,” he didn’t even bother to hide the smirk in his voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Hey, I wasn’t even half as stupid as you always insisted I was, you know.”

Severus looked sceptical.

“Or maybe I was,” Harry blinked, “but still, I would have listened to you and trusted your judgement in that. He’s your godson after all. Besides,” he grinned, “I’ve always thought him to be someone in need of a leash and a short one at that. Ginny will do him a world of good.”

“You and your leashes. If I didn’t know any better, I would say you have developed a thing for bonding.”

Harry’s eyes acquired a mischievous glint, making Severus narrow his own dangerously.

“Do not even think about it or the term ‘blue balls’ will gain an entirely new meaning for you.”

“You are no fun,” Harry pouted, but then turned serious again. “He will seek me out on behalf of the marriage contract tomorrow evening at the very latest I suppose. We will take it from there.”

Severus nodded. “With him you will gain Zabini and Greengrass.”

“Can’t I come to an agreement with them without Malfoy’s input?”

“You might, though I would not advise that. They are his trusted friends, not yours.”

“ Trusted...” Harry snorted.

“Well, as trusted as they can be in Slytherin.”
“Very well. Come to bed?”

“It is barely nine,” Severus raised an eyebrow.

“Who said something about sleeping?”

“Insatiable minx,” though he was on his feet and on the way to the bedroom already. Harry was not far behind.

“Yeah? And whose hand sneaks into my pants to beg for a go several times a day may I ask? Not mine I grant you. So, enjoy it as long as I’m still young enough to accommodate you. You won’t have that luxury in fifty years from now.”

Severus was out of his clothes and on his back with knees spread wide already. “Do not worry, love. There are always potions for that.”

“Now, how did I know you would say something along these lines?”

Harry’s mouth descended on Severus’ cock dissolving any witty responses formed in his mind.

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Ginny woke up feeling dizzy and a bit sore down below, not to mention crushed by a heavy weight on top of her, and started to panic when the memories of the last couple of hours before she had passed out flooded her consciousness. She lay frozen in fear berating herself for her weakness and thoughtlessness. What she had allowed him to do would have far-reaching consequences for herself and her family. Not only her reputation would be ruined beyond repair, but also her entire life, unless Draco offered her marriage. She could demand that now of course, but her claim would be worth nothing if he refused, since he was the Heir of his House and already engaged through a betrothal contract. Merlin, what had she done!

Draco groaned and shifted making her aware that he was still inside her. Her eyes widened in absolute horror when she suddenly remembered something else. He raised his head and blinked groggily assessing the situation, before smiling at her with uncharacteristic openness. Seeing the expression on her face however, he hastened to reassure her.

“It’s alright. I’m going to marry you. I wanted to ask you, but it has slipped my mind in the heat of passion, forgive me.”

The horror receded, but only slightly. So, he cleared his throat and decided to not delay the actual bonding any longer, lest she changed her mind. He wrapped his arms around her and began chanting the ritual words, claiming her his bride by the right of taken virginity. They both felt the bonding magic settle in their cores and knew that it had worked. They were now irreversibly engaged.

Draco could not help grinning happily when he finally slipped out of her and rolled to the side. Pansy’s ambitious plans to become the next Mrs. Malfoy were now history and he was very much looking forward to see her face when she found out. Ginny was still trembling though and it was not because of the cold air, since the warming charms were still working.

“What’s wrong?”

She gulped and looked him directly in the eyes. “We didn’t use any contraception, or did you maybe?”

“Oh shit!” all colour drained off his face. He really hadn’t thought of that, he hadn’t thought of
anything much beyond the fact that he had wanted to fuck her and she had let him. Everything had
gone too fast for that. “You think you could become...”

“I don’t know,” Ginny sat up and reached for her wand to clean herself a bit before starting to dress.
Draco followed suit. “My period was only a couple of days ago, so maybe we are in luck and it
would be alright, but if not... I would have to drop out of school. My parents will kill me!” After a
moment of fumbling with her shirt she smirked suddenly. “My brothers on the other hand will most
certainly kill you.”

“Great! Such wonderful in-laws I’m going to have,” the sneer on his face was unmistakably just
what it was.

“You haven’t considered that beforehand either, have you?” Ginny was amused despite everything.

“Ha, ha,” he simpered in response, “very funny.” No way in hell he would admit that she was
actually right. “Oh, before I forget...”

He pulled out a ring box and opened it.

“Ohhh, how elegant!”

And it was, she couldn’t have chosen better herself. She had expected some gaudy monstrosity from
someone like him if she was honest, thus it was a rather pleasant surprise. Draco was secretly
basking in her praise, though concealed it carefully while she took it out and slipped it on her ring
finger. The ring resized to fit her immediately.

“Well,” he took her hand into both of his and kissed it gallantly. “Who shall I negotiate the marriage
contract with? You, Potter or your Head of House?”

Ginny laughed throwing her head back. “A difficult question, isn’t it? Well, I suppose Harry and I
would be your best choice considering the circumstances. How about I talk to Harry and arrange a
meeting for tomorrow afternoon? Right now I wouldn’t be averse to going down to the kitchens for a
late dinner. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving!”

“Then allow me to escort you, my Lady,” he bowed and offered his arm smirking playfully.

Ginny took it graciously. “With pleasure, my Lord.”

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Late on Friday night Draco lay in his bed pondering over the surreality of his current situation. Had
someone told him only seven months ago that he would cut off his old life, engage himself to
Ginevra Weasley and swear loyalty to Harry Potter he would have either laughed himself silly or
hexed them off the face of earth. And yet, here he was. And he was not only content, but actually...
dare he say it... happy.

Well, stranger things had happened he’d say. Theodore Nott became the Prince of Slytherin and
married Hermione Granger; Severus Snape fell in love with Harry Potter; Harry Potter shook off
Dumbledore, became a Lord and Master in his own right and married Severus Snape. In the face of
all that his own contribution to the freezing over of hell would seem to be not that great. No, Draco
Malfoy was given a chance to shine in an entirely different category, that of the cloak-and-dagger.
And he loved it!

He had joined the New Order and was given the position of the Master Executioner, and no, not the
one who hanged people, but rather the one who gave them enough rope to hang themselves. And he
loved it! Had he said that? Yes he had, but one more time wouldn’t hurt, just to make sure. Point was that he absolutely loved bringing down people he disliked and with the sole exception of Potter he was quite good in that, too. That was actually one of the main items attracting him to the Dark Lord. However, he was also the type of person who didn’t like to get their hands dirty, much less bloody, and the service to the Dark Lord would have forced him to do both.

To make a long story short, he got everything he had ever wanted. The independence, the power, the girl and the position and everything to a rather small price to boot. Just by casting aside his entire upbringing, denouncing most of his family and allying himself with his former enemies. Life was good!

His first and at the moment main assignment was to plan and execute the downfall of Albus Dumbledore, the illustrious Headmaster, Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump and overall meddling coot. Oh, how he loved it! He had been barely able to contain his glee at the prospect when Potter had told him. The old man wouldn’t know what hit him!

Sighing contentedly Draco turned to his side and drifted into sleep, dreaming of a redheaded beauty, glorious deeds and even greater rewards.

xxxooooxxx

Cassius Warrington was pacing his bedroom in nervous agitation. Merlin, what had he gotten himself into! He should have listened to Gwain, he really should have. How the hell was he supposed to get out of this mess alive? Giving in to his father’s wishes and taking the Dark Mark had been the stupidest thing he had ever done. And now what?

He stopped abruptly and took a deep breath raising his Occlumency shields and calming down. It was a good thing that he was a dab hand at it or he would most certainly be dead by now. He needed help that much was for sure. Alone he was just a sitting duck. He would slip up sooner or later and then it would be out. He took another calming breath and resumed his pacing, slower this time, more thinking than panicking.

He would contact Professor Snape and start negotiating his escape. He had heard rumours that Potter did not demand compensation for his services, which he had a hard time to believe though. Therefore, he would need to acquire a sufficient bargaining chip before he made his approach. Some sort of vital information he could exchange for his safety. Trouble was however that he was just a fresh recruit and as such, was mostly kept out of the loop. His business was to follow orders to the letter and not ask any stupid or, Merlin forbid, suspicious questions. How was he to get it?

Well, snooping, spying and eavesdropping would be a start he supposed. If he got caught, he would be a dead man. On the other hand, his clock was already ticking, so essentially he had not much to lose.

He summoned a house-elf and ordered it to bring him a Dreamless Sleep potion. If he was to pull that off, he would need any and all rest he could get.
January passed on to February in a relatively peaceful routine and Harry had the inkling that he should have known in retrospect. It had been too peaceful. Dumbledore had not made his move at the time, neither had Voldemort, thus the trouble had taken them by surprise coming from an unexpected source, Ronald Bilius Weasley.

To make a long story short, he had somehow managed to follow Hermione around undetected on Valentine’s Day and had caught her snogging with Theodore in a deserted corridor of the castle. Instead of blowing up then and there though, he had done the unbelievably sneaky thing and had reported it to Dumbledore immediately, making it sound like he had seen Theodore blackmail and all but force himself on her while saying that she had no other choice but to marry him, since no one else would want her as a muggleborn anyway.

However, Dumbledore had not only swallowed that, but taken the matter very seriously, far more seriously than Ron had expected. He had been hoping apparently that the Headmaster would deal with his rival quietly and in private. Instead, he had summoned the four Heads of house, as well as the supposed offender and the victim, to his office and initiated an immediate tribunal where Ron was called upon to give testimony. Needless to say that the outcome had not presented Ron in a very good light in the eyes of the present. McGonagall in particular was ready to spit fire and had suspended him from Quidditch for the rest of the year, personally offended that one of her own would lower himself to spreading such heinous slander.

Feeling spiteful Ron had revealed the identity of Hermione’s “fiancé” in the middle of the Gryffindor common room the very same evening, earning himself a week of detention to boot. Thinking about it Harry was glad that he was not staying there anymore or he might have killed him on the spot. Ginny however had no such qualms, not only hexing the daylights out of him, but writing home express. Harry had wondered why such a hurry at first, until he remembered that in doing so Ron had not just offended Hermione and Theodore, but actually the Head of House Nott and his wife “to be”, which would warrant a challenge to a wizards’ duel. Consequently, the Weasley parents had arrived at the school the next morning offering a formal public apology on behalf of their family, that was graciously accepted, and taking Ron out of school for the rest of the weekend. Harry did most certainly not envy him his lot.

To say that the entire Hogwarts was quite excited at the social drama playing itself out before their very eyes, would be an understatement. The grapevine was having a field day and Harry could only imagine what the Monday morning Prophet or worse, the Witch Weekly, would look like with those sickeningly sweet Romeo and Juliet references flying around. If it was that bad already, he did not want to know what would happen when they found out about Draco and Ginny. Judging by their faces neither did those two.

Theodore and Hermione were hiding in Harry's and Severus' new family quarters at the moment and would stay in the guest room there until Monday morning at the very least. Harry sighed and shook his head in mild amusement, smiling to himself despite everything. People would always be people, no matter if magical or not. Severus placed a kiss on his lips wordlessly agreeing with him.

xxx000xxx

“You knew.”

Draco smirked at the sense of déjà vu sitting with Blaise and Daphne in the Slytherin common room on Saturday evening, which was lively abuzz yet again.
“I did.” There was no use in denying it.

Daphne huffed and crossed her arms in annoyance. Blaise though just raised an eyebrow waiting for an explanation.

“It wasn’t meant to be public knowledge,” he leaned back in his chair pursing his lips in amusement, “not for the next year and a half at least. And Weasley will pay dearly for his hissy fit despite his parents’ apology, the Notts are not the only party he has offended after all.”

“And you know that how?”

Draco chuckled and raised a privacy ward with a flick of his wand.

“Are you sure you want to know?” he eyed them with his customary haughty smugness. “There is a price to pay for being informed, as you’re well aware. The question you should ask yourselves first is how far you want to get involved in this war, or even if you want to get involved at all.”

The look in Blaise’s eyes was calculating. “There is actually an option of staying out of it entirely?”

“Of course. Potter is a very generous Master, as you must have already heard, and his protection is offered with no strings attached. You have therefore the options of taking it and being just grateful; taking it and offering casual services like support and information in return; or pledging loyalty to him and becoming an active member of his organisation with all the duties and benefits it entails.”

“And what goals does this organisation pursue exactly?”

“Well, the destruction of the Dark side of course, but also the neutralisation of the Light one; political and social reformation of the wizarding world and charitable endeavours.”

His friends were staring at him in disbelief, making him chuckle again. “Yes, I know, it’s quite a variable assortment, but that’s what makes it so attractive in the first place. It’s the side of Grey if you wish, so you will find no extremes there, no predominant tendencies in a particular direction. There is practically a bit of everything for everyone.”

Blaise and Daphne exchanged looks conferring silently, before coming to a mutual decision and turning to face him. “In that case I believe it would be in our best interest to join as well.”

“Indeed,” from personal experience Draco could only agree. “I’ll arrange a meeting with Potter for you some time tomorrow.”

Harry stretched out his magical senses and concentrated on the feeling of Severus’ signature while he levitated a quill in front of him. He could almost see the magic leave his wand in a constant current to support the object in the air. He had also noticed that every single piece of magic was spell specific and not always needed a constant supply of energy to be maintained. They could even operate completely on their own after their first build up and release. It was absolutely fascinating!

But back to the task at hand. He raised his wand and cast the same spell wrapping Severus’ magic in his own and trying to merge them. The effect was very interesting to watch every time, instead of simply adding up, the power seemed to multiply exponentially and either burn the quill to crisp or send it up to crash against the ceiling. This time however Harry tried to do it slowly, very slowly, watching their magic merge and expand like a cloud of luminescent smoke, instead of exploding as it usually did. He opened his eyes and was greete with the sight of a room full of hovering furniture, the couch they were sitting on included.
Severus was watching him with a raised eyebrow and he could not help but grin happily. “It worked!”

“Obviously, now lower everything, with as little damage as possible if you will.”

Harry rolled his eyes, but complied landing them and the rest of their possessions safely on the carpet, before cancelling the spell.

“Now, wipe that disgustingly smug smirk off your face and show me what you did,” came the grumbling demand and Harry stretched out his tongue, before lowering his Occlumency shields to let him in, feeling quite accomplished nonetheless. They had been working on this for almost a month and had yet to see any progress until now.

Severus withdrew rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “I believe we are approaching this matter completely wrongly, Harry. I have been merging our magic just as slowly as you just did from the very beginning and not seen any significant difference in the outcome.”

Harry blinked. “Any ideas?” He sure as hell did not have any.

“I assume you were concentrating so hard that you did not notice you were using Occlumency to direct the process?”

Harry shook his head lost in thought. If it was indeed the case, then...

“We have made the mistake of treating magic as an entity, just like we did with the body and mind, and it is not,” Severus frowned here. “I actually should have known that. Magic is so deeply interwoven with both that it cannot be worked upon separately.”

Harry nodded rubbing the bridge of his nose in annoyance, a habit he had picked up from Severus since the second bonding actually. How could they have overlooked that? A whole month wasted on nothing! Suddenly, an interesting idea entered his mind making him smirk wickedly and stand up holding out his hand.

“You know what, we should relocate to the Room of Requirement. I have a theory I’d like to test.”

Severus raised an eyebrow in question, but took his hand and got up to follow him without comment.

xxxoooooooo

Monday morning Ronald Weasley had returned to school appearing rather subdued. Draco could only well imagine what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had threatened him with and therefore smirk gleefully inside, it would not do to gloat openly after all. Honestly, if he was reacting to the Notts like that, they probably should keep the news of him and Ginny under wraps as long as possible. Trouble was however that she was quite a way underage, being just fifteen, and though she was perfectly able to sign a marriage contract on her own, the pureblood traditions demanded that at least her parents, if not her Head of House, were informed.

Draco sighed taking a sip of his tea. They had discussed it to a great length in the circle of the New Order and came to the conclusion that there was nothing for it and at least her father would have to be informed, and by no other than himself in person. The thought left him with a bitter aftertaste in his mouth when he set the cup aside. He really did not want to do it, and most certainly not alone for obvious reasons. On the other hand, the look on Arthur Weasley’s face would be most certainly something worth the trouble in his books.
Anyway, on the upcoming weekend there would be another Hogsmeade outing, since there had not been one on Valentine, a perfect opportunity for him to take the Floo to 12 Grimmauld Place with Harry’s permission and have a little chat with his future father-in-law. Most of the Order of the Phoenix would be out on patrol that day, so there would be as little witnesses as possible. Dumbledore would find out eventually, not doubts there, but he won’t be present on the day in question and that was all what counted.

He looked over to the Gryffindor table catching Ginny’s eye and smirking suggestively, making her blush slightly and look away. She had turned out not to be pregnant, thank Merlin, and they were diligently taking every precaution ever since. And boy, there was a lot of ever since! Who knew shagging would be that great? Had someone told him earlier he would not have wasted four months on fumbling around and taken her his bride immediately. But well, no point in fretting over what could have been, especially with their appointment in the Slytherin Quidditch locker rooms after training this evening in mind. Life was good! Upset in-laws could wait to be worried about at some later time.

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Harry and Severus lay joined in both body and mind on the bed while their magic was whirling in and around them like a never ending storm, the residue of which was hungrily absorbed and fed into the inner and outer wards by Hogwarts itself. Ever since the first bonding it had been laying in wait, hoping in its abstract way that these two daring lovers would go through with it to the end and unbeknownst to them regenerate its dwindling strength. There was no beginning and no end to them, space and time had no meaning, neither any of their essential needs until the bond would be complete. Until then Hogwarts would take what it could. They could not harvest the excess energy produced during their merging anyway, nor had they any use for it, the ancient castle on the other hand had, and in return it would cover their absence by any means at its disposal.

It had forbidden the portraits to report their movements to the Headmaster long ago. Now though even that would not be enough. The Headmaster was a powerful, clever and curious man. He could not be stalled for too long. Thus, it sealed their quarters to everyone instructing the elves to place decoy evidence of their presence randomly, even to resort to illusions and enchantments if necessary, and to divert the attention of the possible searching parties from the Room of Requirement at all cost. A failure would not be acceptable. Thus, it would not fail.

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Saturday arrived far too early in Draco’s opinion. He really did not want to do that, but would have to anyway. The plan was sound and solid, even with Severus’ and Potter’s... no, Harry’s... mysterious disappearance. The members of the New Order had received short messages written in Severus’ hand stating that the two of them had business to do and would not be back for an unforeseeable amount of time, but no more than a fortnight. Furthermore, they had been instructed to not answer any questions and deny any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Granger... no, Nott... Mrs. Nott, he reminded himself yet again... had suggested that they might be attempting the final bond of the Triple Union. If it was indeed the case, then Merlin help them. That they had managed the first two was unbelievable enough. Draco was unashamed to admit that his eyes had nearly popped out of their sockets when he had heard about that. Madness, absolute madness! No doubt it had been Pott... Harry’s idea.

But back to his plight. He had dressed carefully this morning and made sure he had all the necessary papers on him, before meeting up with Ginny for some last minute instructions and heading down to the village. In the Three Broomsticks he had paid for the Floo and bracing himself said the password
and destination, before he was whisked away to his doom.

Stepping out of the fireplace in the 12 Grimmauld Place kitchen he was greeted with the sight of Mrs. Weasley frozen in shock in the middle of some lunch preparations. The terrified scream that followed had nearly blown his eardrums out. A moment later there was a sound of running feet and the kitchen door burst open revealing Mr. Weasley and another unknown man with their wands raised and directed at him. Draco knew better than to move even an inch, though he cleared his throat and decided to open the conversation as long as he was still able to.

“I beg your pardon for my unannounced intrusion, Mrs. Weasley. However, there is an urgent matter I need to discuss with your husband that could not be divulged beforehand.”

Mr. Weasley blinked not lowering his wand. “Beside the point as to how you have managed to gain access to this house in the first place, Mr. Malfoy, what exactly is it you wish to discuss with me?”

“The matter is of a private nature and I would rather not talk about it in the presence of a third party, sir,” he looked pointedly at the unknown man. “And as to the password to the Floo, I have been entrusted with it by the Master of the house himself.”

Frowning in confusion Mr. Weasley finally lowered his wand, but did not put it away. “That the said Master is missing at the moment does not speak well for you actually, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco rolled his eyes in annoyance. “My business here has nothing to do with Harry Potter, the war or your precious Order, Mr. Weasley. It concerns you and your family alone. If you are so uncomfortable with me being here, I suggest we get it over with as quickly as possible and I will leave.”

“Very well,” he stepped aside to let Draco pass him and go ahead, looking not very convinced though.

“Arthur, you’re seriously going to talk to him alone?” the other man protested.

“It’s alright, Sturgis, I’d better find out what he wants and be done with it quickly.”

Now that was not very nice, Draco pursed his lips in amusement, I can’t wait to see the look on your face, you goody two shoe Gryffindor!

“Arthur...”

“It’s alright, Molly, don’t worry,” Mr. Weasley gestured at the open study door on the first floor above them and Draco went ahead.

With the door closed behind them Mr. Weasley offered him a seat and took one opposite him still with wand in hand. Draco cleared his throat again.

“A bit more privacy would be warranted, sir.”

Mr. Weasley narrowed his eyes, but did cast an anti-eavesdropping charm anyway.

“Very well,” Draco allowed himself to relax marginally. “I believe it would be for the best that we drop the formalities and come down to business straight away, sir.” He looked the man directly in the eyes. “I have asked your daughter to marry me and she has agreed.”

All blood drained from Arthur Weasley’s face. Draco had a hard time to not start crowing in delight.
“However, since I had a prior magical betrothal contract with one Pansy Parkinson at the time, our agreement needed to be concluded by a contract even more binding. Thus, we have committed to each other irreversibly through the Claim of Virgin Blood.”

Mr. Weasley blanched even more if possible. His skin had acquired a slightly ashen tone and he actually seemed to be close to passing out. Draco felt a bit of pity stir deep inside and therefore gave the man some time to recover before continuing. He pulled out a copy of the marriage contract and put it on the desk in front of him.

“We have written out and signed a formal marriage contract already, sir. Though, if there are some points you absolutely don’t agree with, they can still be altered at any given time before the actual ceremony.”

Arthur Weasley took a deep breath and opened his eyes to take in the young man sitting before him with a barely concealed air of smugness, and did the only thing appropriate given the circumstances.
Actually, he could not say that he had not expected something like that to happen, Draco mused picking himself up from the floor and assessing the damage done to his jaw. Though, when it did happen, it still took him by surprise. Mr. Weasley was pacing some distance away. The jerkiness of his movements and the tenseness of his posture and face were giving away just how angry he was, barely restraining himself from attacking Draco again.

Suddenly, he moved over to the desk and picked up the marriage contract unrolling it and flopping down on the couch he had been sitting on before. Draco made use of that time to cast some healing spells on his rapidly swelling cheek, before turning to face him again.

Mr. Weasley read the papers carefully, but then snorted in derision and threw them on the floor. “Very well, what do you want?”

Draco blinked in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play coy with me, boy!” Mr. Weasley exploded. “You are holding my daughter’s reputation and the good name of my family in your hands, I got that well enough, now tell me what you want!”

*He thinks I’ve duped her!* Draco’s eyes widened in recognition. *He thinks I’m blackmailing him!*

Well, considering their family history it was not too surprising he supposed.

Mr. Weasley jumped up and resumed his pacing. “Proud of yourself, aren’t you, boy? How clever and ingenious to wrap a young, innocent girl around your finger with false promises, only to discard her when her use has dissipated! You are destroying her life! But well, she is just a Weasley, so it doesn’t matter, does it?” he sneered sarcastically in his direction.

Draco bristled and rose as well. “I don’t care what you think of me and my family, Mr. Weasley, but I’ve been raised a gentleman and am a man of honour! And at least give your daughter a bit more credit, she is neither innocent nor stupid, and most certainly not easy to fool!”

Mr. Weasley was regarding him through narrowed eyes, obviously not believing a word of it and still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Losing patience rather quickly Draco decided he had enough. He had done his duty and informed his bride’s father of their plans. So, as far as he was concerned they were finished here.

“You know what, believe what you will,” he straightened his robes and made himself ready to leave. “I came here to inform you as traditions and propriety demanded, and I have done so. Good day, Mr. Weasley,” he bowed and headed for the door.

It was hit with a heavy locking charm before he had reached it though. Draco whirled around wand in hand and ready to fight. Honestly, the whole idea of him being here was a bad one and he had known that from the start. So, why in Merlin’s name had he agreed to it then?

Mr. Weasley was looking at him with a strange expression on his face, a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. “You are actually serious, aren’t you?”

Draco suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. “I believe I have made that clear enough, sir.”

“Why?”
He raised his eyebrow in question.

“Why her? You are a Malfoy, so what in the name of Merlin has possessed you to propose to my
daughter?”

He smirked at that. “I am a Malfoy, and as such I always choose only the best.”

Mr. Weasley regarded him unimpressed. “And what of your father’s wishes?”

“What of them?”

The man’s pointed look told him that he actually wanted an answer to that. Draco sighed and moved back to the couch to sit down again. This would be a lengthier conversation than he had expected it seemed. Mr. Weasley followed suit and picked up the papers from the floor, folding and putting them in his pocket this time.

“My father, Mr. Weasley, has nothing to say on the matter of the future of the House Malfoy as far as I’m concerned. Not only has he deliberately turned away from the principles distinguishing our family name, he has thrown it into crisis and disgrace.”

They exchanged glances of understanding here; there was really no need to elaborate further on the point.

“His political affiliations aside, I really don’t know why he chose Ms. Parkinson my bride. I have my suspicions of course, but they would not have mattered much if she at least did care about me personally and I about her. Recent events let me believe though that all she cares about is my money and standing and that is not to be tolerated! I want a wife, sir,” he looked the man in the eyes conveying his honesty, “not a gold digging trollop, who does nothing but squander my money all day.” He smirked suddenly. “And as to your daughter, well, she got into my head and refused to leave. The rest is between her and I, and that’s all what I’m going to say about it.”

They sat for a moment in silence, until Mr. Weasley finally sighed and ran his hand through his sparse hair, as if in search of words. “I still don’t know what to think, young Malfoy, that much I can tell you for sure,” the gaze directed at him was serious and heavy. “I want to believe you, to give you a chance to prove yourself, if only for my daughter’s sake, but the generations old feud running between our families does not permit an easy forgiveness; you understand I’m sure?”

Draco nodded once. He would not have expected anything else.

“That you have not gone through the official channels, doesn’t speak in your favour either, though considering the circumstances I at least can understand that. What bothers me the most at the moment is that I don’t know anything about your own political affiliations, not to mention your future plans concerning the upcoming war and beyond.”

Draco leaned back in his couch thinking fast. They have entered dangerous territory here, particularly because he had not received any instructions as to how to proceed in a scenario such as this. Neither Pott... Harry, nor anyone else in the New Order had even considered the possibility of something like that to come up. In retrospect they actually should have, he thought furrowing his brows ever so slightly. What the hell was he to do now?

He looked up regarding the man sitting opposite him calculatingly. On the other hand, this could be an excellent opportunity to unsettle that undying faith the Weasley parents had in Dumbledore. The Weasleys were among his most ardent supporters within the Order of the Phoenix. if they began to waver, many of the others won’t be far behind. It would be definitely worth the risk. And even if P...
Harry won’t agree, the task of bringing down the Headmaster was his, and how he would do it was consequently his own business as well.

He pulled his wand again and secured the room more efficiently. “Before we continue I would require a Wand Oath of you, Mr. Weasley, that anything discussed from this moment on will stay between us.”

Mr. Weasley’s eyes narrowed again, but his curiosity got the upper hand and he complied.

“Excellent,” Draco put his wand away. “As to my political affiliations, I’m still a firm supporter of the pureblood ideology. However, on the side of the Grey and not that of the Dark. I do concede that some of the aspects I have formerly believed in are not true. The magical superiority of purebloods over the muggleborn for example.” That one he had learned the hard way actually. “Fact remains though that the loose politics in regard to wizard/muggle relations Dumbledore and the Ministry are pursuing, are far too loose for my tastes.” He smirked slightly. “In that respect the side of the Grey is ideal for me. It is moderate and based on compromise, and compromise is something neither Dumbledore, nor the Dark Lord is capable of.”

The confusion written all over Mr. Weasley’s face was very entertaining he had to admit. The man had opened his mouth several times, only to close it again, as if unsure if he should protest or agree, or maybe both. After debating with himself for several minutes he seemed to have settled on something else entirely.

“This side of the Grey you have mentioned several times, I’m not sure I understand what exactly you are talking about.”

“The side of the Grey is led by the Lord of Dusk and Dawn, whom I have pledged loyalty to.” The look of shocked disbelief he had received was absolutely hilarious. All he had allowed himself to respond with was a sly smile though. “Well, he doesn’t call himself that of course. It’s just a private joke,” he cleared his throat to cover his amusement. “The goals we are pursuing are of both political and social nature. Primarily, to end the upcoming war with as little bloodshed as possible on both sides, and in its aftermath to reform the wizarding world and establish a society everyone, no matter their background and inclinations, could live in without feeling the urge to seek the next conflict straight away.”

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Arthur blinked several times before furrowing his brows thoughtfully. “Assuming that this organisation does indeed exist, how exactly do its goals differ from those the Light side is pursuing?”

“Quite simple,” Malfoy’s lips twitched wryly. “The Light side is pursuing these goals for Light wizards and creatures only. The side of the Grey on the other hand, does pursue them for everyone. And this organisation does exist, I assure you. It has existed for quite a while actually. Though, since we prefer to operate in shadows, most people are not, and likely never will be, aware of us.”

Arthur opened his mouth to protest, but then closed it again turning thoughtful instead. If he was honest with himself, the boy did have a point, and since he could not offer any real evidence to the contrary, he would not be able to dispute his assertion for wrong, and that was bothering him to no end. It had been bothering him for a while actually.

Arthur Weasley was a rather quiet man, who preferred to sit and observe instead of starting or even joining an active argument. Thus, he could not help but notice that Dumbledore’s words and actions were contradicting themselves at times, and lately more often than not. The whole business with Harry and Severus was a dangerously boiling cauldron, as far as he was concerned. That aside,
young Malfoy was right and Order business had nothing to do with the situation at hand. Merlin’s balls! He still could hardly wrap his mind around it. How on earth was he supposed to tell Molly?

“Very well,” he focused back on the young man sitting opposite him. “I will concede to that for now, but this conversation is not over yet, I assure you. I will go through the contract with my Head of House and let you know...”

The wards came crushing down and the door flew open hitting the wall with a resounding bang. Dumbledore stormed in wand drawn with Sturgis and Kingsley on his heel. He could see Molly shifting worriedly from one foot to another in the corridor outside. Young Malfoy had the presence of mind to stay as he was thankfully, so he got up and lifted his hands reassuringly.

“It’s alright, Albus, nothing is going on here. We were just talking in private.”

His fellow Order members looked sceptical, but followed the Headmaster’s example and lowered their wands. Dumbledore’s eyes wandered between him and Malfoy questioningly.

“Actually, we were done here already,” Malfoy rose and straightened his robes before bowing formally. “Good day, Mr. Weasley, we will hear from each other sometime later I assume. Gentlemen, Mrs. Weasley,” he bowed to Molly passing her on the way out. Kingsley went after him to see him through the Floo. Dumbledore had not said anything, despite the fact that Malfoy was out of bounds without permission, turning to him and Molly with a raised eyebrow instead.

Arthur sighed and sat down again with a fretting Molly by his side. He ignored the questions thrown at him immediately to take a moment and gather his thoughts. Kingsley returned soon enough looking confused, and rightfully so he supposed. One look at Molly and he knew that he could not tell her the truth, not the entire truth at least. Ginny was their favourite child after all, as well as the one carrying the highest expectations. Maybe that was exactly where they went wrong, heaped too much on the girl’s shoulders driving her to desperate measures. Draco Malfoy, for Merlin’s sake! She must have been desperate indeed! Unless there was something he was unaware of, and that he really did not want to think about right now, not ever actually.

He took Molly’s hand into his squeezing it lightly. “Young Malfoy has asked me for Ginny’s hand.”

She stared at him eyes wide in shock. “WHAT?”

The expressions on the others’ faces were not any different.

“It’s rather unexpected, I know,” he sighed rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. “Fact remains though that his intentions are serious. I will have to speak to uncle Percival as soon as possible.”

“But... it’s Malfoy... how... you can’t... I mean she will never agree! How can you even think of doing that to her?”

He took a deep breath. “As a matter of fact, young Malfoy told me that he has proposed to her before coming here,” he paused bracing himself, “and she has accepted him.”

“What?”

“Molly,” he squeezed her hand more forcefully, “it’s out of our hands I fear. She has accepted him already and is therefore bound by honour. Besides, I doubt that uncle Percival is going to say no to a Malfoy. Son of a Death Eater or not, as long as he doesn’t have a Mark himself, he is an eligible match, a very eligible match actually and you know that. There is nothing we could possibly do to prevent it, dear.”
Predictably, Molly went into hysterics at that and he wrapped his arms around her protectively, his face grimly set. As bad as this was, it was far better than the truth. He kissed the crown of her head. She must never know; he would make sure of that.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Arthur, Molly, I must advise you to not be too hasty in this. Do not do anything before you know all facts and do not trust young Malfoy’s intentions on his word alone. Who can tell what power and influence his father might still have over him? Or if he had lost any of it in the first place? Besides, was there not some previous betrothal agreement with Ms. Parkinson? If you would entrust me with the matter, I would deal with it swiftly and to everyone’s satisfaction. I doubt the boy could not be persuaded to turn his interest elsewhere.”

Molly perked up looking hopeful, Arthur though could not allow anything of the sort. Not only would it be highly improper, it would be an entirely futile endeavour, since the engagement was irreversible.

“Thank you, Albus, but there is nothing you could possibly do. It’s a Weasley family matter and we cannot put it into an outsider’s hands, no matter how helpful and trustworthy. I will contact my Head of House as soon as possible... immediately actually, and let him decide on any further course of action. I will tell him of course that you have offered assistance, but I cannot guarantee that he will take it.”

Arthur could clearly see that the Headmaster was quite displeased, despite his friendly smile. “But of course. Tell him he can reach me any time.”

He nodded patting Molly’s arm in comfort. He could not let Dumbledore meddle in this, thought he had a feeling that he would do so anyway. He would seek out uncle Percival as soon as Molly let go of him. Afterwards, there were quite a few questions his daughter would have to answer, that much was for sure.

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Draco returned to the castle and made his way to the remote storage room he and the rest of the New Order had agreed to meet in. Dumbledore’s premature appearance was bothering him deeply. What would Mr. Weasley tell him? Not much, if he had judged the man and his reactions correctly, but one could never be too sure.

In any case, the Headmaster was now aware of his and Ginny’s relationship and would of course try and put his nose into it. They had to prepare for that carefully. His reaction to the Notts’ ‘engagement’ had not been very cordial and Draco would not put it past him to start playing dirty. Severus’ and Harry’s marriage must still smart after all. Where the hell were they by the way? They needed them now, urgently.
Harry and Severus came slowly to awareness. It was the strangest of feelings, yet quite welcome, like separating one entity into two in body, mind and magic. As soon as it came to pass, they both realised at the same time what must have happened. The Triple Union was now complete.

Harry put on his glasses, which had fallen off and landed on the bed next to Severus’ arm at some point and summoned his wand. As soon as it had touched his palm, the Trace on it dissolved into golden mist and disappeared, confirming their assumption irrevocably.

Their eyes locked and they grinned somewhat maniacally. It had not been planned, true enough, but the outcome was nonetheless most satisfactory. Harry was feeling like he owned the world, absolutely heady with the power coursing through his very veins, pulsing in tandem with his heart. And Severus was obviously feeling the same.

Suddenly, another entity made its presence known to them, making them jump asunder and cover themselves, frantically looking around in search of it to its apparent amusement. A moment later their faces went up in flames of embarrassment when they realised that it was just the castle itself. Hogwarts thanked them for the energy they had contributed, however unwittingly, and informed them of the events that had come to pass in their absence, as well as the measures it had deemed necessary to undertake on their behalf, then wished them all the best for their future and retreated leaving two astounded wizards behind.

“Holy Mother of Merlin!”

Severus could only agree. He had never heard of the castle interacting so directly with anyone beside the Headmaster, and even then, only in extreme emergencies. This was more than just a privilege, it was an honour!

Harry shook his head and cast a Tempus Maximus. Sunday the 23th of February 1997, half past ten. He looked over to Severus locking eyes with him again. According to the castle’s account the shit was bubbling dangerously high, but had not spilled over as of yet. Theoretically, they still had some time before they absolutely had to make an appearance and that was exactly what they needed right now. They needed to test their new power levels before they could face the world and Dumbledore in particular again. Secondly, they had business with the goblins to conclude, due to Harry’s coming of age. And finally, they would need to inform the New Order that they were about to reappear, and with flourish no less.

“The Chamber of Secrets?”

Their empty stomachs chose that moment to complain, making them both smirk slightly.

“The kitchens, then the Chamber of Secrets,” Harry amended.

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Dinner was long underway when Harry and Severus returned to Hogwarts after their visit to Gringotts and entered the Great Hall. They proceeded to their respective tables inconspicuously, taking their seats noticed only by their immediate neighbours, who in Harry’s case at least were expecting him. The head table on the other hand, had not expected to find the Defence Master back among them just like that. After listening to all sorts of accusations and conspiracy theories flying around in the staffroom, which the Headmaster had not had the grace to either dispute or confirm, his
colleagues greeted him with shocked and confused glances, which Severus decided simply to ignore turning to address Professor Sterling two seats over instead.

“I must thank you for taking over my classes for the week again, Serenius. I trust you did find the lesson plans I have left you satisfactory?”

“Er, yes... yes... they were most helpful, Severus... thank you,” Professor Sterling cleared his throat looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“Any trouble with the students?”

“No, not at all.”

“Very well,” Severus nodded and began filling his plate.

“Severus,” the Headmaster’s voice sounded on his far left, “I would like a word with you after dinner in my office, if you do not mind, and Mr. Potter too for that matter.”

“Of course Headmaster,” he nodded in his direction, not bothering to look up though.

The rest of the staff exchanged meaningful glances, but did not comment returning to their meal. Dumbledore leaned over to Minerva conferring with her hastily, before she got up and went over to the Gryffindor table, obviously to speak with Harry.

Severus found the whole exchange most amusing to his own surprise. He could clearly remember to have greatly respected the man not that long ago, now however he could barely bring himself to feel even something as deferential as contempt. Within one short week Albus Dumbledore had been reduced to no more than a self-important clown in his eyes. And not only Dumbledore, the Dark Lord, his Death Eaters, the Order, the Ministry and the wizarding public in general were all not much better.

It was the power he supposed. Power made all the difference and did the strangest things to one’s perception. Never in his life had he felt that confident, that independent and that was probably something he should keep a good eye on, lest he became overconfident. They became overconfident, he corrected seeking out his husband’s eyes and transferring his concern directly to his mind via Legilimency. Harry smiled wistfully and nodded in agreement, promising to look out for him, if he returned the favour. They really were quite a pair Severus smirked to himself devoting his attention to his meal. Had someone told him only last year, he would have never believed it, and yet here they were, in love and married and all.

He shook his head in sudden exasperation. Merlin, he really had become a sentimental fool, had he not? The blasted brat was rubbing off on him again!

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They entered the Headmaster’s office to find it packed with Order members to their secret amusement. Honestly, the man was so predictable! They had not been offered a seat, which left them to stand before the gathering like some delinquents on trial. They both had a hard time keeping their smirks off their faces at that pathetic display of weight pulling. Merlin, how absolutely hilarious! Oh, if these people only knew...

Something must have given them away though, seeing as Dumbledore was regarding them suspiciously through narrowed eyes. They schooled their faces into an expression of polite neutrality and made themselves comfortable leaning against the wall. Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see Fawkes cock his head at them in curiosity. Could the phoenix feel the change in their power
levels? Probably. Thankfully, his communication with his master was limited. Thus, he would not be able to give more than a general warning.

“Severus, Harry, leaving school without permission has been very irresponsible of you in the face of recent developments. You have given us all quite a scare with such a sudden disappearance, not to mention caused a lot of trouble. May I ask where you have been?”

Severus frowned feigning surprise. “I beg your pardon, Headmaster, have you not received my message? I believe I have explained clearly enough that there was a personal emergency and we needed to leave immediately.” Or rather Hogwarts had, but that was beside the point of course.

The Order members present exchanged surprised glances. Obviously, they had not been privy to that bit of information. Had the old man honestly thought that he would get away with it? Unbelievable! He really was getting old it seemed. Even a child could see through that.

“I have not received any such message I fear,” Dumbledore responded without missing a beat. “And that only amplifies my point. You should have informed me in person at the very least.” Changing his demeanour from chastising to disappointed Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh. “Does Harry’s welfare mean so little to you, Severus, that you would endanger him so carelessly? I have expressed my concerns regarding this union clearly enough and it seems that they have been more than justified.” His face hardened in determination. “This is absolutely unacceptable! Your actions indicate that you are unfit to be your husband’s guardian and I have therefore no other choice but to propose your removal from that responsibility to the Wizengamot. It needs to be given to someone more suitable.”

Harry and Severus chuckled openly to the entire room’s bewilderment. Merlin, he would never learn, would he? Harry cleared his throat and detached himself from the wall sighing and shaking his head in amusement.

“You know what, Headmaster, do your best,” and with that he turned to leave with Severus by his side.

The office door clicked shut and lit up in a myriad of wards before they reached it though.

“I believe I have not dismissed you yet, gentlemen,” the old man sounded quite pissed actually.

Smirks growing wider they pulled their wands and dismantled the wards with all but a couple of flicks, earning themselves shocked gasps from their audience. Dumbledore’s face lost all colour.

“No, sir, but we are leaving anyway,” Harry did not even bother to conceal the smugness in his voice, opening the door and stepping through without glancing back.

The time of playing around was officially over. Let’s the war begin!

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To Lord Ignatius Parkinson, Head of House Parkinson,

My Lord, it has come to my attention that the engagement you have concluded on behalf of your daughter Pansy to one Draco Malfoy is possibly no longer valid. Having great respect towards your family I saw it as my duty to bring it to your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Anonymous
The doors of the Entrance Hall banged open startling the denizens of Hogwarts from their breakfast and causing them to crane their necks to have a better look at what was happening. In the open doorway of the Great Hall a small delegation of witches and wizards appeared, making their way directly to the head table, lead by a tall, but quite heavy man with short black hair and a face like a pug.

“Headmaster Dumbledore, I beg your pardon for my unannounced intrusion, but there is an urgent matter I need to discuss with one of your students that cannot wait.” He turned towards the Slytherin table. “I need a word with young Mr. Malfoy alone.”

The hall turned into a sea of exited whispers when the Headmaster gave his consent. Pansy was looking between her father and Draco in confused bewilderment, obviously wondering what the hell was going on.

Severus Snape rose from his seat. “Alone is a relative term it seems,” he surveyed the entourage disdainfully. “Being Mr. Malfoy’s godfather and Head of house I am acting in loco parentis and therefore insist on accompanying him.”

“Very well,” Mr. Parkinson sneered making a dismissive gesture, not even taking his eyes off Draco. “Come along then, boy, we don’t have all day.”

“Not so hasty, Lord Parkinson,” a new voice sounded. All eyes turned towards Harry Potter walking up to the group and joining his husband’s and Draco Malfoy’s side. “As a Black in blood young Malfoy is my responsibility. Whatever matter you have to discuss is going to be discussed in my presence, and I for one insist on even numbers.”

Immediately, Neville Longbottom, Hermione Granger, Theodore Nott, Luna Lovegood, Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass rose from their seats and joined them, making both delegations even.

Mr. Parkinson faltered visibly, but seeing no legitimate reason to deny that, had no other choice but to go along with it. The student and teacher body was murmuring frantically, watching both groups leave the Great Hall in search of a private location. This year’s haul of social scandals seemed to be greater than ever before indeed.

Albus Dumbledore was pacing his office in a state of nearly rage. It had been a long time since he had been that angry. He knew that he needed to calm down to be able to think properly, but the constant stream of failures flooding the forefront of his mind made it nearly impossible.

He stopped and took several deep breaths, trying to raise his Occlumency shields for the dozen’s time it seemed. Slowly, but steadily his tumultuous feelings receded like the clouds of a storm, leaving only clear skies behind. He continued breathing for several more minutes until he was absolutely sure that he was in control again. Then, he sighed and sat down in his chair behind the desk feeling very tired, despite it being only three in the afternoon.

The Fates had turned against him it seemed and he really did not know what he could have possibly done to deserve that. He had hoped that Lord Parkinson would be able to put young Malfoy back in his place, but with a backing from Harry Potter himself that was hardly going to happen. Why in the name of Merlin had Harry chosen to step in for him? They were childhood rivals, it simply made no sense! Unless...
His fists clenched when his anger threatened to return, but he managed to push it back successfully. *Snape! It all must be Snape’s doing!*

Who else would be in the position to manipulate both of them strongly enough to bring forth some sort of understanding, if not an alliance? And not only the two boys it seemed. The engagement between Nott and Granger and the pending one between Malfoy and the Weasley girl did suddenly appear in a whole new light. Snape was apparently planting his personal agents in the ranks of the Light, and thereby building out a network, which would likely become his own power base in the future. That new Lord on the rise he had heard rumours about must be none other than Severus Snape!

Dumbledore blinked several times shocked by this revelation. It did explain a whole lot actually! Snape had the intelligence, the ruthlessness and the determination to pull off something of that magnitude, that much was for sure, not to mention the power, as he had demonstrated only yesterday.

*He must be using Harry as a smoke screen while pulling the strings from the shadows, manipulating them all, myself included.*

Yes, that would make perfect sense! Snape was using the side of the Light to bring down his former Master, while using Harry to weaken Dumbledore’s own position. After Tom was brought down he would likely dispose of Harry and himself and use the chaos of the aftermath to get the wizarding world under his control.

The Headmaster smiled nastily. It was quite a brilliant plan, he would give the bloody snake that, and it would have actually worked, if Snape had not made the mistake of tipping his hand too early. But well, impatience was a vice of youth, a vice the elder ones could always count on using to their advantage it seemed, and Albus Dumbledore definitely knew how to do that.

xxxooooxxx

The long day at work came finally to an end allowing Arthur to finally gather his papers and prepare to go home, or back to the Headquarters in his case, since the Burrow was not safe anymore. He sighed rubbing his tired eyes. The past couple of days had been very trying indeed. First, Harry’s and Severus’ sudden disappearance that had turned out to be just a misunderstanding or so Dumbledore wanted it to seem at least. Then, his daughter’s unexpected engagement that he still had trouble coming to terms with and lastly, the disturbing power play between Harry and Dumbledore he had witnessed.

He sat back down deciding to take a moment to gather himself again. He could hardly face Molly in the state he was in. She was distraught enough as it was, no need adding to it.

As predicted, uncle Percival had been more than pleased with the engagement. So pleased actually that he did not even care under what circumstances it came about, congratulating Arthur on having such a clever minx of a girl that she had managed to land such an illustrious alliance. Arthur could only stare in shock at the time. Who had thought the old man would be that brazen? The marriage papers were to his liking as well. Thus, there was nothing left to do, but to set a date and step back and watch his only daughter marry Lucius Malfoy’s son.

He sighed shaking his head. He probably should stop judging the boy on his father’s merits, or lack thereof, he had acted honourably after all. Beside that, Ginny had chosen him willingly. And Arthur knew that she would have never done so, if the boy was rotten beyond hope. She had trusted him with her reputation and he had lived up to that trust, if anything that was definitely something Arthur could respect him for. Not that he had any other choice but to accept him of course, seeing as he
would become his son-in-law no matter if he wanted that or not.

The business with Harry and Severus was a different cauldron altogether. The show they had pulled in Albus’ office had been most impressive, that much at least was for sure. The implications left in its wake were not as pretty though. As a matter of fact, it smacked of more than just a deep estrangement between Albus and the two, but rather of an outright violent conflict. Any Order member with brains enough to put two and two together could tell that, Arthur himself on the other hand, was one of the few who had taken the possibility of Albus’ losing under serious consideration though.

And that was where he was torn in his feelings. He knew and liked both Harry and Albus well enough. He knew their hearts and intentions were pure despite their many faults, but he could also tell that Albus had lost his touch with the reality of things, while Harry had embraced it in full. Should they face off in the near future, Albus would likely not make it out whole. What he could not decide upon was, if it would be a good thing or not.
“How could you, you shameless bastard!”

Draco and everyone else in the Slytherin common room turned to watch an irate looking Pansy making her way towards him. Her father must have informed her about the no longer existence of their engagement hours ago. And yet, she had waited until now, long past dinner, to make her stand. Presumably, to have a greater audience, Draco smirked to himself. How predictable!

“Yes, Pansy dear, how can I help you?” he drawled with false politeness, not even trying to hide his amusement.

The members of the New Order leaned back to watch the show, while the rest of the common room was exchanging looks, ranging between eager curiosity and confusion.

“Don’t you dare sweet talking to me, you honourless piece of scum!” the harpy screeched shaking her finger at him. “You are the worst sort of cad alive! Breaking the betrothal contract concluded between our families and running off with some cheep slut? How dare you even call yourself a pureblood!”

The audience behind them broke out in exited murmurs, edging closer to have a better view. Pansy’s demeanour changed from angry to weepy within a blink of an eye.

“I’ve trusted you!” she wailed in a bad impersonation of a victim. “I have trusted the honour of the Malfoy name! So much for that!”

The last part came out as a hiss and she switched back to angry again.

“Who’s that whore that has spread her legs for you in a desperate attempt at social climbing? Tell me this instant!”

“Says the trollop that has Selwyn’s tongue in her cunt on regular basis, despite being supposedly engaged to me,” Draco put in without missing a beat and leaned back crossing his arms. “Honestly, darling, did you really think I wouldn’t notice?”

The common room exploded in whispers while Pansy was trying to regain her composure, spluttering in anger and surprise. Draco rose from his seat and straightened his robes feigning boredom.

“I am a Malfoy, darling, and we Malfoys do not marry gold-digging sluts. You should have remembered that and so should have your father when concocting that pathetic attempt at enriching himself,” he sneered looking down at her in contempt. “Now excuse me, I have better things to do than contributing to the public amusement any longer.”

He pushed past her only to be met with the tip of Selwyn’s wand directed at him.

“I think you should apologise to Miss Parkinson for making false accusations in order to cover your own misconduct, Malfoy, as well as to me for involving my person in them.”

“You think?” Draco smirked unimpressed, his own wand ready to spring into his hand with the slightest flick of his wrist. “Really, Selwyn, you shouldn’t. It’s definitely not something you are good at.”
With that said the fight for the ultimate dominance over the house Slytherin began. The first- and second-years ran for their dormitories, not even sparing a thought towards making a stand. This was not your occasional skirmish between rivalling groups, this was an all out war and they all knew that. Ducking behind furniture the neutral and the fence-sitters removed themselves out of the line of fire, waiting, bidding their time to join the winning side as soon as it was determined beyond doubt. Unlike the ‘little ones’, they were not allowed to leave the battlefield. It was the price of cowardice, but one they were ready to pay, even if it meant that they might end up victims of the spellwork went astray.

 Barely ten minutes later it was over. The Death Eater wannabes had been the larger group by far, though Theodore’s people had cut them down without breaking a sweat nonetheless. It helped that the marked seventh-years were no longer here, Draco supposed, or it would have gone over a bit more bloody than that.

The entrance to the common room slid open and Severus stormed in, stopping abruptly and surveying the carnage before him with a face of indifference. He raised his wand and levitated the injured towards him to make sure no one was in a critical condition. Those who were able to walk on their own followed him into the corridor outside. He turned towards the victorious party one last time.

“Clean it.”

With that he briskly walked away leading the injured along hidden passages towards the hospital wing. The Headmaster would not be informed. There was a reason there were no paintings down in the dungeons after all. Whatever happened in the house Slytherin, stayed in the house Slytherin.

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Harry was eating his breakfast next morning, lazily contemplating this day’s schedule when a sudden hush around the Great Hall alerted him that Hermione and Theodore had just arrived and taken seat at the Slytherin table. Honestly, as if the sheep had not had ample time to adjust themselves to the idea. Though, hearing it was not the same as actually seeing it he supposed. Maybe, it was also the fact that she was probably the first muggleborn to sit there, ever since that stupid blood purity conflict had escalated centuries ago.

He raised his head slightly to catch a glimpse of the head table and frowned. Dumbledore did not look pleased of course, but it was the gaze of pure loathing he had thrown Severus’ way that bothered him. Something was amiss in that quarter his gut was telling him and he’d be well advised to keep a better eye on his husband’s back from now on.

The frantic whispering that had started hushed again when Neville slid one seat over to make room for Draco, who had plonked himself next to him as elegantly as such an action allowed and started to fill his plate, not heeding the gaping Gryffindors around him. Harry cast a discreet Muffliato.

“How’s your little project going?”

Dumbledore needed to be neutralised as soon as possible. His stupidity was starting to grate on his nerves, not to mention that it could become detrimental to their plans.

“Not bad so far. Mr. Weasley has informed me that his Lord has approved of the match and the contract. The engagement will be made public in the tomorrow’s paper. Then, the show will begin.”

Draco took a sip of his tea. “Dumbledore will throw all his weight into trying to discredit it, since that one would be definitely one prominent Slytherin/Gryffindor match too many and the public opinion would begin to change to the Slytherins’ favour once again, undoing all his careful work. He simply
won’t stand for it, thus expose himself to accusations of prejudice and intolerance towards a good quarter of the British wizarding population.” Putting the cup back down, he began buttering his toast. “The Weasleys will be caught in the crossfire and I sincerely doubt that they are going to take the esteemed Headmaster’s side this time. Their defection will inevitably rip the Order apart, weakening the side of the Light to the point of inaction. The side of the Dark of course will take that opportunity to strike, running blind right into our many traps, which would decimate their numbers greatly as well. Those who are unlucky to escape would suffer under their master’s anger, which is likely to send a new recruit or two crawling back to us.” He opened a jar of strawberry jam and put a generous spoonful of it on his toast, spreading it evenly. “All in all, the whole business is going to raise your standing with the common witch and wizard quite a bit, while lowering Dumbledore’s at the same time. Your friend, the Minister, will likely get his slice as well, since it would be the Aurors who’d have to clean up the mess after we are done.”

“Excellent,” Harry cancelled the anti-eavesdropping spell and looked up to be met with Dumbledore’s piercing, blue eyes boring into him.

Unable to help himself he smiled.

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Albus Dumbledore did not consider himself an overly superstitious man, but the smile Harry had given him this morning was making him feel like someone was dancing on his grave, or so the muggles tended to say. It was a constant feeling of unease he only ever associated with waiting for something unpleasant to happen.

He sighed rubbing the bridge of his nose under his glasses and looked at the piles of paperwork on his desk with an air of resignation.

Was the boy so corrupted already that he would wish him harm? Was he so entangled in the net of Snape’s manipulations that he could not be recovered? No! He could and would not believe that!

Harry was and always had been a good boy, but exactly therein lay the problem, he was just a boy. Young, strong-headed and naive, easily impressed and mislead in the wrong hands. And there was no question that the hands he was currently in were the wrong ones. Harry needed to get away from Snape’s influence and soon, but the only way to do so would be to show him that bastard’s true colours, and the only way for that to happen would lead to the breaking of a law or two.

But did it really matter as long as the boy was returned to the right path? Yes it did! The goals did not justify the means. Bending the laws somewhat was one thing, breaking them was another, not to mention that it would lower him to Tom’s level. But what else could he do?

He narrowed his eyes. Harry was a very righteous individual, maybe bringing Snape’s past to his attention in detail would disenchant him with his husband at least somewhat. Thinking even further, maybe it would also disenchant the wizarding public with that wannabe new Lord on the rise as well. Or at least make them wary against him, hindering his plans when he finally tried to grasp the power.

Smirking to himself Dumbledore opened his inkwell and took a quill and a piece of parchment. He would write to Alastor and request a copy of all Snape’s public and not so public records. It was time to make his move. He had let it go on long enough as it was.

xxxooxxx

Molly Weasley sat at the kitchen table buried in notes, lists and bridal wear magazines, sniffing
woefully from time to time. No matter how desperately she had hoped and prayed, the marriage of her daughter to Draco Malfoy was now inevitable and keeping herself busy with preparations was her way to cope with it. True, the ceremony would not take place until the beginning of July at the very earliest, but considering the standing of the groom’s family, four months would be just barely enough.

Traditionally, it was the groom’s family, who bore the cost of the wedding, so money would not be a problem. Young Malfoy had sent her a very polite letter giving her his Gringotts vault number and the permit to charge all cost to his name. It was the bride’s family, who planned and organised it though, and that meant it needed to be perfect in every respect or they would embarrass themselves greatly.

So many things needed to be thought of, the right date chosen, the arithmetical equations made, the old pureblood traditions honoured... And then there was the location, the actual ceremony, the reception, the guest list and so on, and so on...

Molly sighed heavily, yes, four moths would be just barely enough, and on top of it all, she was worried sick for her little girl. There was something Arthur was hiding from her she knew, the reason why he was not fighting this liaison claw and tooth. She knew her husband well and he was taking this far too calmly. That of course could only mean that he was either resigned or not that averse to the match after all, either of which she could not understand.

Not that she could understand Ginny’s decision to accept young Malfoy’s offer in the first place. It could hardly have been just compliance to her Lord’s wishes. She knew her daughter well, or so she hoped, Ginny would have never accepted a Death Eater wannabe, no matter how eligible. Harry would have never allowed that as well, though considering who he himself had chosen, she should not be so sure.

But no! It was not fair to say something like that about Severus. He was a good man, despite the mistakes he had made in his youth. Draco Malfoy was his godson, so maybe... just maybe... he was not lost to everything that was honourable and good as well, or so she hoped. To hope for the better was the only thing she was left after all.

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The Room of Requirement was filled with panting and moans of pleasure that night. Ginny and Draco had decided to use that last night of quiet before the storm to enjoy themselves in full. There was no denying after all that it would be some time until they would be able to meet in private again. Too many curious eyes were going to follow them around, not to mention the livid ones of her brother.

But Ginny did not want to think about Ron right now, nor about the confused and reproachful letters from her parents in the drawer of her bedside table. She wanted just to lie there and enjoy the afterglow, with her lover deep inside her and his weight pressing down on her heaving chest. Thinking about it, she did not even know why it felt so good... so right... with him of all people. She was not in love with him yet, she was pretty sure. Being fond of someone was a large step in that direction, but not quite there all the same, so why then? Thinking even further, why had she seduced him that morning by the end of June in the first place? Why had she wanted to? Why had he wanted to for that matter? She was a Weasley and he a Malfoy, it did not make any sense.

Her musings were interrupted by a playful mouth and tongue making their way down her neck and chest towards her breast and nipple. She moaned and arched into him when he began suckling on it. She fisted her fingers in his hair to bring him closer and looked down to be met with that mischievous glint in his silvery eyes. Ginny could not help but smile at him fondly. He was always
so boyishly playful in bed! No one would believe her, if she should ever choose to tell.

He slipped out of her, only to replace his cock with his fingers, pushing them in and out, while rubbing her clit with his thumb and continuing to suck and nibble on her breasts.

*Oh, Merlin, this always feels so good!*

She mewed her appreciation, rocking her hips into his hand, and since she was still aroused from her last orgasm in did not take him long to bring her off again.

“**DRACO! Oh... Draco...**”

“Yes,” he hissed with an unmistakable smugness, before pushing his half-hard member into her spasming channel. He drove into her as hard as he was able to at the moment, riding out the aftershocks of her clenching muscles. “Yes, witch, say it again! Say whose cock makes you feel this way!”

“Draco’s,” she moaned obediently, wreathing under him.

“Damn right, it’s mine,” he growled pounding into her now in earnest. “Mine, all mine, the first and only you ever had. The only one you’ll ever want. Say it!”

“Yes... yes... the only one I’ll ever want!” she howled finding herself on the blank edge of yet another orgasm. A few more thrusts and she was falling again, screaming his name like there was no tomorrow.

“Holy Merlin...” she sobbed clinging to him for dear life, black spots dancing in her vision. That was one hell of an orgasm! Draco however did not heed her, driving into her forcefully, grunting with pleasure and exertion. Thus, she relaxed and let him take his own pleasure as he liked. Not that she was not enjoying herself at that, it was just a bit overwhelming, since he had never been that possessive before.

“GINNY! Oh... Ginny...” he collapsed on top of her breathing heavily and pressed his face into her neck.

Ginny wrapped her arms around him tighter, because that was when she finally understood. He was just a lonely boy and she just a lonely girl, and both of them just wanted someone to call their own. And that was all there was to it.
Shattered Perceptions

“WHAT THE HELL!”

The shout cut through the excited chatter of the Wednesday morning breakfast goers shortly after the post arrived. Everyone looked up to watch Ronald Weasley storm towards his sister with a Daily Prophet crumpled in his fist.

“What the fuck have you done?” the expression on his face was beyond rage.

“Got engaged you mean?” Ginny was buttering her toast unperturbed. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“TO THE FERRET? HAVE YOU GONE COMPLETELY BONKERS? HE’S A DEATH EATER!”

“Really? I didn’t see any Mark on his arm only yesterday. Has he become one overnight?”

“You... you...” Ron was spluttering with anger and disgust, apparently unable to process the concept of them being together that way. So, he gave up and directed his ire to something he could understand, or so he believed.

“It’s all your fault!” he pointed an accusing finger at Hermione of all people. “You have given her the idea, haven’t you? Going on and on about that bloody snake of a fiancé of yours... You have brainwashed her! Made her believe that scum isn’t all that bad, right?” he was trembling in suppressed rage. “Whoring yourself out is one thing, but pulling my sister down with you is another!”

The sound of Hermione’s hand connecting with the side of his face reverberated through the entire hall. “HOW DARE YOU, YOU PATHETIC BASTARD!”

Professor McGonagall was hurrying towards them and ordering them to stop this nonsense immediately, but Hermione and Ginny did not care. They pulled their wands and proceeded to hex the living daylights out of him with the most painful curses in their repertoire, until their wands were ripped out of their hands by the Professor’s Expelliarmus.

McGonagall came down on them like a ton of bricks, ordering Seamus and Dean to take the bleeding and unconscious Ron to the hospital wing and the two girls to follow her to her office. When the dust had settled the entire Great Hall broke out in chaos. People were either muttering excitedly or arguing with each other in loud voices, creating a hum that was strongly reminiscent to an angry hive.

“SILENCE!” Dumbledore’s voice cut them all off. The Headmaster had a look on his face none of them had ever seen before, like he had bitten into something sour. “Students, that is quite enough! Please proceed to your classes of the day.”

Everyone got up and obeyed, at least until they were out of his sight.

xxxooooxxx

My dear Draco,

Imagine my surprise when I opened the today’s paper! I am very upset that you obviously decided to
leave it to the press to inform me of your plans. Though considering, I can only assume that you did not want to have an argument on your hands.

To be honest with you, darling, I am not sure whether the argument would have been all that great. Yes, she is a Weasley and that in itself is a point demanding thorough discussion. However, in the face of the alternative, it does seem like you have traded well indeed.

I know it must surprise you to read this. My words and actions in the past must speak against me. I can only ask you to forgive me my weakness, since as you know your father did not take it well to be contradicted. He never deigned to explain that particular decision to me, brushing my concerns aside and even losing his temper whenever I persisted. However, since it was made shortly after his trial in the wake of the Dark Lord’s first fall, the thought presents itself that it had something to do with the fact that Lord Parkinson was substituting for Mr. Crouch as the Head of the Department of Law Enforcement at that time.

My only wish was for you to find happiness despite the circumstances, thus I have tried to be as supportive as possible, to make the situation easier on you. I am glad that you have found your way around the contract with a partner of your own choice. I am very proud to see you rise above your father’s shadow and finally become a man in your own right. I only wish he had not succumbed to madness past the point of no return and were able to appreciate the effort you have made to bring the House Malfoy back to its former glory.

My dear son, let me hereby formally congratulate you. I wish you and Ms. Weasley all the best and look forward to meeting her properly.

With all my love,
Your mother

xxxooooxxx

To Harry Potter, Heir of House Potter and Black,

Dear sir, sensitive information concerning your esteemed husband has found its way to my desk, that I honestly have my trouble to decide what to make of. Please consent to a meeting with me at my office at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Barnabas Cuffe, Editor of the Daily Prophet

xxxooooxxx

Friday evening found the 12 Grimmauld Place kitchen packed with the usual assembly of the Order of the Phoenix members, however minus Severus Snape, which had not gone unnoticed by those who had brains enough to think for themselves. Fortunately for Dumbledore, those consisted of just about two dozen, unfortunately, the very same two dozen were the best of the best he had.

He surveyed the gathered people with an air of grave determination. The main item of discussion tonight was not an easy one, but needed to be addressed and decided upon as soon as possible. He had neglected the danger Severus Snape posted for far too long and now the safety and integrity of the Weasley family was severely compromised. He had lost the brilliant mind of Hermione Granger and the power and money standing behind Harry Potter already, he was not going to give the bastard any more ground! If Draco Malfoy were indeed to marry Ginevra, then the whole family would become no longer trusted, and that he was not going to let happen. The Weasleys may not be the
most respected family in the community, but they were magically powerful and had countless
connections anywhere and everywhere in the country. To have to turn them away would be quite a
heavy blow to the Order. Without doubt it must be exactly what Snape had in mind setting his
godson up with their only daughter.

Arthur’s compliance with the whole arrangement was making the Headmaster frown. Could the man
not see that the blasted boy was leading them all by the nose? A Malfoy having serious designs on a
Weasley’s hand, it was a travesty if he had ever seen one! But no matter, if the man was indeed so
simple as to believe in fairy tales, then it was his duty to show him the truth of things.

Dumbledore cleared his throat gaining himself the Order’s full attention. “My dear friends, as you
might have already guessed, I have called you together this evening to discuss the latest bit of news.”
He turned towards the Weasley parents. “Arthur, Molly, I wished I could congratulate you, though in
the face of the identity of your future son-in-law I find that I cannot.”

Molly visibly flinched here, staring up at him with wide eyes. Arthur’s face though became set in
stone, even if his eyes were betraying his anger. It was such an uncharacteristic expression on him
that it made Dumbledore pause, but he brushed it off soon enough. William and the twins did not
seem to be impressed either, nor was Minerva. The pureblooded members sitting around the table
appeared quite taken aback and were exchanging uneasy looks, while the rest was either blinking
confused or nodding grimly.

“Forgive me my blatant rudeness, but my only concern in this matter is your family’s safety.
Whatever reasons Draco Malfoy has presented to you on behalf of his proposal, I personally cannot
imagine how any of them could possibly be true, which leads to the conclusion that his motives are
far from honest and need to be worked against.”

There was a disturbed murmur. Those who were blinking in confusion a moment ago were now
nodding in wide-eyed stupidity. The pureblooded section though, was even more taken aback than
before. It was not good. He needed everyone’s agreement in this or there would be no agreement at
all. Dumbledore was about to open his mouth to rectify the situation when he was interrupted by
Arthur.

“And how exactly are you suggesting we work against them, Albus?”

The man’s voice was calm and strong, betraying nothing of his feelings. The look in his eyes was
telling a different story. Dumbledore though decided to ignore the warning bells going off
somewhere in the background of his mind and charged ahead. With the whole of the Order behind
him he would be able to force the entire family’s compliance anyway.

“Arthur, this marriage would compromise not only your own safety, but the entire Order’s as well.
The Malfoys have a long history of service to the Dark in one capacity or another. Can you seriously
believe that this one fruit has fallen so far from the tree as to become Light all of a sudden?”

“No,” Arthur had an ironic little smile on his lips, the meaning of which was absolutely
unexplainable given the situation, “but I can well imagine him to become Grey.”

William’s and the twins’ heads shot up pinning their father down with a strange gaze. Feeling his
sons’ eyes on him Arthur’s own narrowed as he looked from one to another calculatingly.

Unable to understand the whole exchange Dumbledore frowned. “Grey is not good enough to be
trustworthy, Arthur.”

“No, I suppose not,” the man turned back to face him once again, “not to you at least. But you have
still not answered my question, Albus.”

To say he was shocked would be the understatement of the year. Arthur Weasley of all people talking back to him? Questioning his opinions? Biting down on the words of reprimand, threatening to spill from his lips Dumbledore put on the mask of the bringer of grave, but unavoidable tidings.

“The answer is quite simple actually. Since accepting young Malfoy into your family is equivalent with bringing him into the Order, and the later would put the war effort and all our lives at stake, the engagement between him and Ginevra must be annuled.”

The room exploded in cries of outrage, shocked gasps and shaking heads mixed with shouts of agreement from the more fanatical supporters, drowning each other out. Such a proposition was very radical, even in the eyes of the non-pureblood section, thus it was unsurprising that the yes-man had found themselves in a clear minority and silenced, magically or otherwise, very quickly.

Dumbledore was seething inside. Did they not see that it was the only way? Did they not understand the consequences? The world they all knew and loved was in danger of falling into the grasp of Darkness! Snape might be a lesser evil than Voldemort, but it did not make him any less evil!

Oh, he blinked suddenly, but they do not know that, do they? I have yet to tell them.

His age must be finally catching up with him, if he had forgotten to share findings of such importance with his most trusted, not to mention the rest of the Order. He was about to open his mouth and do just that when he was interrupted yet again.

“You are actually suggesting that I go against propriety, traditions and my Head’s of House wishes, Albus? And with the full awareness that my daughter will lose more than just a prosperous alliance, but her very honour and any further chances of marriage in the future? And we aren’t even talking about the consequences it will have for the rest of the family! All of us will be immediately disowned and publicly disgraced and you know it well, old man! How dare you even hint anything of the sort, much less demand it!” Arthur Weasley’s fist came down on the table forcefully, his face contorted in rage.

All eyes turned to Dumbledore, awaiting his response. He met them with deliberate calm. Molly was staring at him in disbelief, the other Weasley men with badly veiled disgust. The rest of the Order was in various stages of anger and shock, he could not tell if it was at his actions or Arthur’s though, which was worrying him. This turn of events was rather unexpected. He had believed that the man would jump on the opportunity to get rid of the unwanted family addition. Why on earth was he holding onto it so vehemently? Was there something he was not telling?

“Arthur, I believe your concerns are somewhat exaggerated. It is just a simple betrothal contract, is it not? Voiding it should be of no difficulty, especially with a good reason behind it. I assure you that after young Malfoy’s public exposure as a Death Eater in the making, which would be of no difficulty to arrange, since it is exactly what he is, your Head of House will all but demand it himself.”

“I see,” the fist still lying on the table clenched so hard that its knuckles turned white. “In this case I find myself forced to inform you that the betrothal contract is actually far from simple, it’s irreversible.”

Dumbledore could not help but stare, while an agitated murmur went through the room. “I beg your pardon?”

“You have heard me right, Albus, this marriage will take place no matter what you or anyone else
will say and do. But I must concede that you do have a point where the safety of the Order is involved.” He turned to look into his wife’s troubled eyes and though no words were spoken, it was clear that a question was asked.

“Molly?”

“Aye,” was her broken whisper.

“Bill?”

“Aye,” the young man’s voice rang clear and strong.

“Fred, George?”

“Aye,” came in unison.

Arthur nodded in grim determination. “So be it.” He rose helping Molly to her feet and turned to face Dumbledore again. The other Weasley men followed suit.

“It is hereby decided that since the Weasley family as whole, our son-in-law to be included, cannot be trusted, we are leaving the Order of the Phoenix and the service of Albus Dumbledore from this day on,” the sneer that contorted his features was something none of the gathered people would have thought to ever see on this man’s face, “for the greater good.”

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Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk at the Headmaster’s office and holding his aching head in his hands, propped up by his elbows, resting on the for once empty surface. He was waiting for the Pain-Relieving Potion to finally work its way through his system and bring on the much desired result. Slughorn’s potions had been always inferior to those Snape was capable of brewing, but he would be damned if he took anything even so much as touched by that bastard ever again.

Finally, the sharp throbbing receded to a dull thrum and disappeared entirely, allowing him to lean back in his chair and sigh heavily. What a mess! It could hardly become any worse, though he probably should reserve judgement on that, lest he came to regret it one of these days.

As soon as the Weasleys were out of the door, chaos broke loose and no amount of shouting and Silencing Charms on his part was able to contain it. Some people were absolutely raging, others were trying to placate them to no avail, the worst in his opinion however were the ones who just stood up and left without a glance back. Those were the ones he had lost forever he knew and whose letters of resignation from the Order could be expected with the morning post any moment. They would be not many, but their loss would hurt the most, that much was for sure.

He really was losing his touch it seemed. Not to inform anyone of his true motives had cost him greatly this time, very greatly. Once the pandemonium started, it had been too late to try and explain himself. But honestly, how on earth should he have known that the engagement was irreversible? Had Arthur not insisted on keeping him out of the loop, it would have surely not come to such a disaster. And now what?

The Weasleys had packed their things and vacated the Headquarters, leaving for the Burrow most likely, which meant that they were sitting ducks for the Death Eaters to pick off from now on. His fists clenched angrily.

Well, if they insist, it is none of my concern anymore, is it? He nodded grimly. So be it. May their son-in-law to be protect them now, if they are so keen on choosing him over the Order and the
The firmly set lips curved into a nasty smirk. *They are going to crawl back before too long.*

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of his breakfast via house-elf. To go down to the Great Hall in the state he was in was not something he wanted to subject himself to. In addition to that, Snape would be there and he was not sure he could trust himself enough, not to try and strangle him with his bare hands.

Finishing up he opened his window to let in the usual stream of owls, relieving them from their burdens one by one. As expected there were a handful of very familiar handwritings on quite thick looking envelopes. He sighed heavily and unrolled the morning paper.

**THE CHRONICLES OF AN UNSUNG HERO: A FOOLISH BOY’S REDEMPTION**

*A documentary report of Severus Snape’s hitherto secret career as a spy among the Death Eaters of the Inner Circle.*

Every breakable object in the Headmaster’s office exploded to a scream of rage.
The Darkness Strikes

The three assault groups of ten men each apparated to their designated points along the perimeter of the wards surrounding their target. The night was cloudless and calm, but suffused with crisp coldness, that was noticeable even through their thick, black hooded cloaks. The window of what was presumably the kitchen was still lit, despite the late hour, indicating signs of habitation.

The leader’s lips twisted into a gleeful sneer. Their Lord’s informants have done their snooping properly then. The ginger blood-traitors were indeed back home.

He raised his hand signalling for everyone to begin. The perimeter wards were dismantled in short order and the anti-Apparation and Floo-blocking wards set up in their place. This was not an ancestral home after all, thus nothing could prevent them from doing so. The blood-traitors should have known better than entrusting their safety to this pathetic shack. But well, it is not like they could afford anything better anyway.

Another signal and the Death Eaters began their approach quickly and stealthily, using as much cover as possible, until the house was surrounded from all sides. These men knew their business, unlike the clumsy snot-bags they have recruited lately. Rodolphus could only shake his head in annoyance, but this was neither the place nor time to contemplate such things. He had work to do, very pleasant work actually. He grinned behind his mask and cast a blasting curse, blowing the front door out of its hinges. Hearing the back door crash in as well he gestured his men inside, before following them.

The first and second group moved fluidly up the stairs, separating on the many landings to search the individual bedrooms, while the group coming from behind searched the first floor. Rodolphus did not hear any sounds of fighting anywhere, standing and waiting in the hall, which was definitely strange.

“Rodolphus,” Rabastan appeared at the uppermost railing, shouting down at him. “There’s no one here. The whole fucking house is empty!”

Neither had time to consider what that could possibly mean, seeing as all walls gave suddenly in and the entire house folded itself down on them, as if the magic holding it up and together had been removed.

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“Wormtail.”

“Y..yes, my Lord?”

“Go to the Weasley residence and find out what takes Rodolphus so long.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

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An hour had passed since he had sent that pathetic worm out to get some information and he was still not back. Neither were Rodolphus and his men. The Dark Lord Voldemort had begun to seriously worry.

He stood up from his throne-like chair and went over to the cabinet containing his personal potions. He was loath to have to depend on such things like Concentration Enhancing Potions, but the
backlash of magic from the broken connection between his and Potter’s mind had left him still recuperating.

He took the potion and waited a couple of moments for it to take effect. Then focused and felt for the Dark Marks of all the servants he had sent out on mission tonight. His blood red eyes flew open in shock. There was nothing. He took several deep breaths applying his Occlumency and felt again. Wormtail’s first, then those of the Lestrange brothers, then others... nothing.

Hot rage rose in him in tidal waves, as the breakable objects in the room shattered in thousands of pieces.

One thing was absolutely certain though, someone better explain to him how thirty-one of his best men had wound up dead in just one night... NOW... or they would regret the day they were born.

Amelia Bones was not a woman prone to wistful thinking, thus when the report came in that there was an incident at the Weasley family residence in Ottery St. Catchpole, where thirty Death Eaters were squashed to death underneath a broken down house, she did not automatically assume that it had been an accident. And even though Arthur Weasley himself had assured her that it indeed was, that the family had vacated the place long before to the purpose of refreshing the charms holding the house together, as well as the installation of new, wartime suitable wards, she simply felt that it was too much of a convenience to be true.

Something fishy was going on, she was pretty sure of that, though she had no solid evidence and thus had decided to leave it be for the time being. That was before the next strange report.

Peter Pettigrew’s terribly mutilated body was found nailed to the wall of the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley. The Dark Mark on his left arm had been strategically exposed, so that the people stumbling upon him knew not to have too much pity for him, which indeed had worked. Only after the shop owner himself saw him, had it been reported.

She sighed heavily and put the last of her paperwork aside. It was quite late, but not so late as it could have been. The funds Mr. Potter had so generously donated could not have come to a better time. There was even an assistant in for her that she could barely do without nowadays.

She was just about to leave her office to go home when her fireplace flared green and a frantic Auror administrator’s head appeared inside.

“Madam Bones? Oh, thank Merlin you are still in! There are about a dozen stunned and bound Death Eaters in front of the Ministry muggle world entrance. A muggleborn undersecretary has found them on the way home. There are no high profile ones among them, but it’s quite a haul nonetheless.”

She blinked several times, before shaking her head slightly. “Very well, Rogers, I’m on my way.”

As soon as the man’s head disappeared, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She had been right in her suspicion it seemed. Someone was ruthlessly decimating the Dark forces and was obviously good enough not to leave a trace. Whether it was good news or not, was yet to be seen though.

THE DEMENTORS SOON UNDER MINISTRY CONTROL AGAIN?

Ever since their defection at the end of July the previous year, the former wardens of Azkaban have
been spreading terror and fear among the wizarding and muggle world alike. They have accompanied the Death Eaters on their raids, as well as undertaken some of their own, sweeping through muggle villages and towns in the middle of the night, preying on unsuspecting victims.

What no one knew however was that there has been someone preying on them in return. The Department of Law Enforcement spokesman has confirmed after our inquiry that indeed large piles of Dementor remains have been found all over the country over the past couple of weeks. This information has been kept out of public, because there was no indication as to what has happened, or how for that matter the universally believed impossible acts of mass destruction of these powerful Dark creatures could have been accomplished.

Since this Friday though, they at least might have an idea as to who was behind it. The Dementors themselves seemed to know for sure when they have sent an envoy to the village of Hogsmeade yesterday, causing quite a panic, since it was a Hogwarts Hogsmeade outing weekend.

The envoy has been surrounded by members of Law Enforcement on patrol immediately. It has shown no aggressive behaviour though and has insisted on speaking to Mr. Potter. As predicted, it has caused a heated argument to issue, until Mr. Potter entered the scene in the company of several of his friends and interfered, asking the Aurors to stand back and let him handle the situation.

Eyewitnesses report the following exchange:

The Dementor accused Mr. Potter of hunting down and killing its species mindlessly and demanded to know what they have done to him to be subjected to such treatment.

Mr. Potter responded that it was nothing personal and that since they have allied themselves with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named it was they, who have declared themselves his enemies.

The Dementor wanted to know if Mr. Potter was planning to continue in that venue, until he has extinguished the last one of them.

To which Mr. Potter responded that he was not You-Know-Who (he has used the real name though) and did not presume to decide who has the right to exist in this world and who has not. Saying that ‘...as despicable as I find your species to be, you have a right to your place and reason to exist, just like anyone else...’ and that as soon as they declare themselves officially to be no longer on You-Know-Who’s side, he would leave them alone.

The Dementor asked then, if Mr. Potter wanted them back under Ministry control.

Mr. Potter though just shrugged and said that he did not care what they did, as long as they stayed out of his way and did not break the Ministry laws, nor endangered the Statute of Secrecy.

With that the Dementor envoy and Mr. Potter had parted ways leaving us all with many unanswered questions.

First of all, was Mr. Potter indeed the one decimating the Dementors singlehandedly and how was he doing it? What does the Ministry think of it all? Will there be consequences for his actions? Will the Dementors return back to Azkaban now or just retreat somewhere else? Will they deflect from You-Know-Who’s side in the first place?

These questions and many more this reporter has yet to find an answer to, since neither Mr. Potter, nor any Ministry officials have been available for interviews at the moment.

By Beth Belby
Voldemort was pacing his private study with angry jerkiness. He had been unable to contact the Dementors these past days, which meant that they must have made their decision and it was not one in his favour. On the brighter side, neither was it in the favour of the Ministry. His informants would have told him immediately, if they had made overtures to begin negotiations. Apparently, the negotiations they had with Potter were more than enough for them in the long run.

He stopped and raised his Occlumency shields, lest he started throwing things again. Getting destructive would not bring him anything right now. He needed a cool head and a sharply calculating mind to deal with the problem.

How in the name of Merlin had the blasted brat managed that? Voldemort had been studying the Dark Arts decades before he was even born and had never even heard mentioned that such a thing as killing a Dementor was possible. Well, beyond locking them up somewhere isolated and starve them to death that is.

No matter, the Potter brat was turning out to be more than just a nuisance and that was unacceptable. He had let him be these past months, while he was trying to recover the second part of the thrice damned prophecy. However, not only had he been unsuccessful on that account, the strikes against the Order of the Phoenix he had launched recently had cost him far more than he was comfortable to admit. And now the rebelling Dementors on top of everything!

The morale of his troops was at an all time low. If he did not do something to change that, those faint of heart would start to waver. Worse, some snot noses could start questioning his authority, or even dare to take a leaf out of Severus’ book and turn traitorous. He really should make an example out of him before too long.

Voldemort’s face split into a wide, malicious grin. Why not shoot two birds with one stone? The two lovebirds he should say. They were barely seen apart nowadays anyway, were they not? Yes, he could kill them both at once and use the chaos and despair the wizarding public will fall into at the death of their Saviour and his beloved husband to replenish his battered ranks. No one would dare to question his power and abilities ever again.

Cassius Warrington was sitting in a private room of a shady, old pub going by the name of The Prancing Dragon and wringing his hands nervously. He had every reason to. His entire future might very well be decided upon tonight and if he played his cards right, he might be finally able to escape the nightmare he had been living in these past months once and for all. He took several deep breaths applying his Occlumency. He must not fuck this up!

The door opened and a tall figure clad in a rather shabby, grey robe with its hood up and shadowing its face came in, closing the door behind it and securing the room to ensure privacy.

“Good evening, Mr. Warrington,” Severus Snape drew back his hood with one elegant motion.

“Professor,” Cassius nodded politely and stood up to offer his hand. “Please, have a seat.”

He sat back down and cleared his throat nervously. His former Head of house had always been intimidating, now though he was almost awe striking. The power and confidence the man radiated was almost palpable. How come he had never noticed before? Had he been hiding it? He must have, considering his former position.
Cassius shook his head slightly to focus himself again. Getting off track was not something he could afford right now, especially in the presence of this man.

“Professor, I have asked you to meet me tonight to discuss my deflection from the Dark Side.” With Severus Snape one was always well advised to cut straight to business. “I am in possession of very sensitive information concerning your and your husband’s wellbeing and want to offer it in exchange for your patronage.”

The man’s eyebrow rose in surprise. “Mr. Warrington, surely you must have already heard that our patronage is not bound to any obligations on your side. If you want out, then you are. From this moment on you can count on our support and discretion, unconditionally.”

Cassius could not help himself but stare in shock. Was this really it? Just like that? He could not believe it. And yet, the man seemed completely serious. He blinked and furrowed his brows thoughtfully. His bargaining chip seemed all but useless now. No, he shook himself internally, not useless, just of no use to him personally, so he might as well tell. He did owe this man and his husband his freedom after all, no matter whether they wanted to be owed or not. Slytherins always repaid their debts.

“He wants both of you dead as soon as possible,” he said raising his eyes again. “The recent losses have lowered the fighting spirit of his troops to an all time low. He needs to accomplish something really grand to re-establish his hold, on both his men and the wizarding world.”

Snape was listening intently, but did not seem too worried. Somehow it was giving him a strange sense of reassurance.

“An ambush is planned. Both of you are to be watched closely for whenever you decide to leave the wards of the castle or your many homes to go out in public. A large group of the best of the best with him at the lead is to apparate directly to your location, deal with you quickly and apparate out, without much fanfare. He does no longer want a glorious execution, he just wants you dead. That in itself should be glorious enough to open him the path to victory over Britain.”

A darkly amused chuckle sounded in the room making Cassius jump out of his skin, since it was not coming from Snape, who was just smirking. His hand went for his wand immediately when a second figure appeared seemingly out of nowhere, standing behind Snape’s chair.

He eyed the stranger distrustfully, before his eyes widened in recognition. Was that Harry Potter? No one could blame him for his confusion at least. When he had left Hogwarts Potter had been nothing more than a short, scrawny and rather insignificant boy. The young man standing before him was anything but.

He would never admit it aloud, but there had been many a moment in the past where he had asked himself how a marriage between these two could have come to pass. Was Snape simply a ruthless, calculating bastard or did he just have a thing for little boys? Seeing them together now, he could plainly understand as to how.

Potter in the meanwhile had pulled out a chair and sat down next to his husband. “It would seem that at least one of them has some ability to learn from their mistakes.”

“Indeed,” Snape’s smirk widened.

Cassius blinked not understanding a word.

“Mr. Warrington,” Potter turned to him, “thank you for your information. It is most useful. But let us
discuss your immediate future.” He was met with a pair of almost glowing, emerald eyes and had to restrain himself from squirming in his seat. “Have you secured your finances?”

He nodded not trusting his voice. If Snape was awe striking, Potter was downright supernatural.

“Very well, then from this moment on you are officially dead, until the war is over and the dust has settled. You will not be able to stay in contact with anyone, who knows you personally. And I do mean anyone, with the sole exception of your goblin account manager of course. The most efficient way to secure your safety is to simply hide you in plain sight. You will be able to go out in public under a heavy disguise, but should stay at a safe house we are going to provide for you most of the time. Should you wish to leave the country for the time being, it can be arranged as well.”

This sounded rather reasonable, pleasant even, if not for one little problem. “But what of the Dark Mark?”

Potter’s smirk made something unpleasant crawl down his spine.

“Give me your left arm, Mr. Warrington.”
Dumbledore's Fall

Albus Dumbledore was sitting in his office and reviewing the latest case of a Death Eater attack. By a stroke of luck there had been a survivor, the victim’s child, a nine-year-old boy. More so, none of the attackers had been wearing a mask, indicating that it must have been a completely fresh batch of recruits.

However, since all of the possible suspects were not on record as of yet, the case leading Auror needed a warrant from the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot to haul them in for questioning.

Dumbledore could barely contain his glee, signing paper after paper. One of them did fit the description of Draco Malfoy almost to a letter.

He closed the file and leaned back frowning thoughtfully. It felt good to be justified in one’s beliefs. On the other hand, it did raise a lot of questions.

If Draco Malfoy had been indeed part of that raid, it meant that he was firmly on the Dark side and by association, so must be Snape.

*But this cannot be true, unless...* his eyes widened suddenly *...unless I was giving him too much credit all this time.*

It did make sense. There was no proof that Snape had deflected, or even that he had been discovered as a spy by Tom, beyond his own word, and that was proven not to be trusted. For all he knew, this entire mess was an elaborate setup of Tom’s to get Harry under his control and bring Dumbledore down, and with him the rest of the opposition.

*Holy Mother of Merlin!*

Dumbledore sat up in his chair face completely ashen, the cold hands of horror seizing his insides with an iron grip. He really was getting old, if he had not seen through that. It was just as brilliant, as it was simple, just the thing Tom would come up with. And it was indeed most successfully done in every respect.

Merlin, what should he do? What could he do this far in the game in the first place? His most valuable pieces had been removed already. First Ms. Granger he assumed. Her kidnapping must have gone differently than what she had told them. She must have been put under charms or potions, or both, to ensure her compliance. That she had escaped relatively unharmed should have rung alarm bells in his mind to begin with. And then, her engagement to Theodore Nott, while his own father had been among those, who had attacked her and killed her parents... Where on earth had been his oh so praised brilliance? Even a child could see something fishy there.

Through her Tom had free access to Harry, and not only that, she had been always the voice of reason in the group. Replacing that voice with one of a careful encouragement towards Snape, combined with Snape’s own coercion, must have lead to that marriage. No wonder then that Harry’s behaviour had changed so drastically. Who was to tell if his thoughts and actions were his own and not controlled though either manipulation or magical means, or yet again both?

After Harry was firmly in Snape’s claws, Draco Malfoy must have been introduced into his group of friends, from where he could easily make his move onto the Weasley girl. The stupid bint had been most flattered by his illustrious attentions no doubt, so no outer means of persuasion were needed to get her to spread her legs for him. From that moment on the Weasley family as a whole had been out
of Dumbledore’s stables for good.

The Weasleys’ defection had not only torn the Order apart, but also cost him Minerva and some of the best other fighters and agents. As of now, the organisation was completely inactive, thus the increase in attacks all over the country. As the things stood, Dumbledore was blind, bound and isolated right now. A sitting duck waiting to be scared up and put down. There was no way out of this situation he could possibly see.

He was sitting there, breathing erratically, cold sweat covering his brow. His clammy hand curled around the handle of his wand, drawing some stability and comfort from its firmness. He was not dead yet and Merlin help him, if they though he would go down like a lamb, they could think again!

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TERROR AND RAMPAGE AT HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY!

HEADMASTER DUMBLEDORE ARRESTED FOR ATTEMPTED MURDER!

A horrific fight occurred in the middle of the Charms corridor at Hogwarts this very morning. Eyewitnesses report that the elderly Headmaster has stormed wand drawn into the open Charms classroom ten minutes before the start of class and started shouting accusations of betrayal and allegiance to You-Know-Who at Mr. Theodore Nott (sixth-year Slytherin) and his fiancée Ms. Hermione Granger (sixth-year Gryffindor), who were already sitting in it together with some of their peers.

Alerted by the commotion Professor Filius Flitwick, the Charms Master, came running into the room from the side of his office. After assessing the situation he has tried to placate the Headmaster, only to be stunned by him with such force that he was thrown into the wall, acquiring a severe concussion.

After that, the seemingly madness driven man has turned his wand on the aforementioned students, who were trying to hold their own to the best of their abilities, joined by Mr. Neville Longbottom (sixth-year Gryffindor), who was sitting next to them and Mr. Draco Malfoy, Mr. Blaise Zabini and Ms. Daphne Greengrass (sixth-year Slytherins), who happened to come in that very moment.

The students have fought bravely, but even together they were no match to the man once hailed the most powerful wizard of the century. Most of them have been severely injured in the battle that relocated from the classroom to the corridor outside. Other students in the room and on their way to class have sustained minor injuries from the spells and debris flying around.

Only Merlin knows what would have happened, if not for Mr. Harry Potter (sixth-year Gryffindor) arriving at the scene at a run. The battle that followed was a sight to be seen, in terms of both terror and magnificence, according to the ones, who had the privilege or the misfortune to witness it.

The entire wing of the castle was shaking at the power released between the two opponents. Walls, both internal and external were blown out around them. It was a miracle that the ceiling did not cave in. The entire corridor was completely destroyed.

In the end it was Mr. Potter, who has gained the upper hand with a well placed Expelliarmus, stunning and binding the Headmaster immediately. The Aurors and the St. Mungo’s emergency team were called in. As far as is known at the moment, there were no deaths, the number of injured however is quite high.

Headmaster Dumbledore was arrested and is currently held in a maximum security ward at the
Ministry of Magic. Neither the Department of Law Enforcement, nor any Hogwarts representatives are available for a statement at the moment, due to the still running investigation. Though, Minister Scrimgeour has personally assured us that the case will be processed and all relevant details made public as soon as possible.

This reporter is staying on the lookout for further information.

By Beth Belby

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The Minister’s conference room was abuzz with agitated murmurs coming from the nervously squirming Department Heads, sitting around the oval table. Amelia Bones was loath to admit that she was rather uncomfortable herself, even though she had too much dignity to actually show it. The Minister however did not seem to have the care in the world, playing with his quill, while waiting for the last of his cabinet running late to settle down.

Amelia would have given him credit for his composure, if not for the feeling that it was not put on. It was baffling her to no end. He had actually the gall to be bored in the face of that disaster? Had he gone round the bend now too? As infuriating as Dumbledore had been at times, his descent into madness was a heavy blow to the very foundations of the Ministry and consequently to the rest of the wizarding world. It could very well cost them the war! And Scrimgeour was just sitting there smirking confidently, like it was nothing more than a slight inconvenience! She felt the rather unreasonable urge to throw her inkwell at him, if only to wipe that smirk off.

When everyone had finally gathered the Minister cleared his throat to gain their attention. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen. There is no good news to bring forward since yesterday evening unfortunately. The Chief Warlock has been transferred to St. Mungo’s during the night, since there is no indication to an improvement of his condition in the near future. He is heavily sedated and put under magic suppressing wards to prevent any further outbursts of violence on his part.

He has been suspended from all his offices and I sincerely doubt he will be ever well enough to be prosecuted for his transgressions, much less to reclaim them again. I have called together an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot for this afternoon, where the new Chief Warlock will be hopefully elected. The position should not be left open too long. The ICW is holding its own court to the similar purpose by the end of this week. Minerva McGonagall is currently acting as the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, though I have it on good authority that the Board of Governors will appoint her the new Headmistress in a matter of days.”

The gathered witches and wizards exchanged uneasy looks. The minister’s almost disinterested stance was making them nervous, not lastly because of what most of them were used to from Fudge. The former Minister would have been all but pissing his pants in panic right now.

Stevenson, the Head of Public Relations, cleared his throat shakily. “What are we telling the press?”

Scrimgeour raised his eyebrow at him. “The truth of course, what else is there to tell? All the stress, the far too many obligations and old age have finally caught up with the man. Could have happened to any of us.”

He turned to address the cabinet as a whole. “Now, as unfortunate as this incident is, we have far more pressing issues to discuss…”

“But...” Stevenson interrupted stuttering in sheer shock at the Minister’s brazenness. “The public will panic surely.”
Scrimgeour rolled his eyes with the expression of a man suffering fools. Amelia had to admit, her respect for her former Head Auror had risen a notch. Despite being a good strategist, administrator and field agent, Scrimgeour had never been above sarming up to the right people to forward his career. Of course in the end it had brought him where he currently stood, though had lost him quite a bit of her respect in the process.

“And why pray tell me should they panic, Mr. Stevenson?” The confident indifference in his voice was unmistakeable. “Contrary to popular belief, Dumbledore did not run the government of the Wizarding Britain, despite his wide involvement. His loss will be felt acutely, I do not doubt that, but surely not to such an extent as to leave us running around like headless chicken. And if we present a calm and collected front, the public will have no reason to lose their heads either.”

He gave them all a stern eye, as if making it a threat, before continuing with the day’s program.

“Now, as I was saying before, we have far more pressing issues at hand...”

Amelia watched the Head of Public Relations sit there wide-eyed and shell-shocked and almost felt pity. Fudge had been always eager to listen to what Stevenson had to say. Such a blatant disregard must have hit deep. On the other hand, the Minister’s independence was quite refreshing. Fudge had never been like that.

Her eyes narrowed suddenly. Maybe it was because Fudge had not had the patronage Scrimgeour must have. It was an universally known secret that it were the Minister’s of Magic allies, that decided the power of the man or woman in question, rather than them themselves. With Fudge it had been Lucius Malfoy pulling the strings behind the scenes. She had to wonder who it was with Scrimgeour.

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Draco Malfoy could not help himself but feel betrayed of his glory. All the carefully thought up and laid out plans he had in store for the former Headmaster were now completely useless with him put away at the St. Mungo’s closed ward. Could the old man not wait to lose his marbles after he was done with him, for Merlin’s sake? And now what?

“Oh, stop sulking, darling, I’m sure Harry has something else for you to do, that you will like even more.” Ginny was not helping. Not in the slightest. Especially with that badly concealed amusement in her face and tone. “Besides, I’m sure it all has been your doing anyway. Your plans just came to fruition a bit sooner than expected.”

He huffed unimpressed, making everyone around him laugh at his antics. They were laid up in the hospital wing at Hogwarts still, though he supposed it could have been worse, far worse. Dumbledore’s sudden cracking had taken them all by surprise and had nearly cost them their lives. Theo was not going to leave anytime soon, that much was for sure, though it was rather entertaining to watch his always prim and proper wife planning all sorts of gruesome murder against the old man.

On the other hand, it had not only removed one of their two main enemies permanently out of the picture in a very elegant and relatively un-bloody way, it had given Harry the opportunity to measure himself up against a powerful opponent without drawing negative attention to himself.

Draco had to suppress an involuntary shudder. The memory of the battle had been etched permanently into his mind and one thing was absolutely clear - he did not want to land on his Master’s bad side. Ever.

The press was having a field day of course. No doubt they were going to talk about it in a hundred years still. Consequently, Harry was hiding out in his and Severus’ private quarters, the lucky bastards. The next reporter to sneak past Madam Pomfrey’s wards was going to be hexed into the
next week, so help him Merlin! What had possessed McGonagall to let those leeches into the castle was beyond him. He sighed in exasperation, but smiled and accepted his fiancée’s kiss goodbye. Unfortunately, she had classes in the afternoon and had to take her leave, together with the soon to be Mrs. Longbottom.

He took up his writing materials to pen a reply to his mother’s frantic letter, listening with half an ear to the conversations around him. Not that they were of any great interest, but old habits died hard.

All in all, he did not have much to complain about, so he really did not know why he was that down in the mouth lately. His future in-laws had visited in the morning and one thing was to be said, Mrs. Weasley’s backing skills were definitely making up for a lot. In the long run though, he would prefer his own mother’s company any time of day. He should ask her to stay with them at the manor when the war was over. However, it was unlikely that she would accept.

The hospital wing door opened and McGonagall came in accompanied by several Aurors again. Just great! Another interrogation. As if their story would change from the last time, if they asked often enough. Surprisingly, that batch made a beeline for him alone.

“Mr. Malfoy, these gentlemen are pursuing an open investigation and have a couple of questions for you.”

Draco just blinked and politely put his letter away. “But of course.”

“Mr. Malfoy, a victim of a Death Eater attack happened to survive and give detailed descriptions of the assailants involved, one of which happens to fit you.”

He was presented with an interrogation warrant signed by the former Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot curiously enough. But well, it must be still valid he supposed, even if the man in question was not quite right in the head, so he nodded his acceptance.

“Very well,” the weathered looking man addressed him again. “Where have you been this Tuesday between ten o’clock and midnight, Mr. Malfoy?”

“I was in my NEWT Astronomy class, sir,” he answered careful to hide his amusement at the disappointment in the man’s companions’ faces. To his credit, the leading Auror’s own had not shown anything one way or another.

“I assume it can be confirmed by the Professor in question and your peers then?”

“Of course,” he smiled all politeness.

The man grunted clearly disappointed as well and gave the one, who seemed to be the trainee in the group a sign to write it down.

Draco, amused enough for the afternoon to feel somewhat generous, decided to help him out.

“The description did fit me you say? Do you have other suspects?”

The man eyed him suspiciously, but decided to answer anyway. “Unfortunately, no.”

“Well then, if I may, the Selwyn brothers Septimus and Sorinus could fit well enough I suppose, though not quite. And I would definitely recommend you to try all of the Montagues. They are my second cousins through their mother and have therefore a very similar colouring. All of them were homeschooled and not seen much of in public, thus it does not surprise me that you haven’t thought of them yet.”
The Aurors stared at him like he had grown something interesting on his forehead. Draco though forged on unfazed, naming at least two dozen other prominent, if reclusive, young purebloods supposedly looking similar to him. When he was done, the only thing heard in the room was the frantic scratching of the Auror trainee’s quill.

After several awkward moments, the leading Auror cleared his throat obviously shaken at the sight of such a selflessly helpful Malfoy. McGonagall was biting her lip with tears of suppressed laughter standing in her eyes.

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, we will be on our way then. Good day,” he nodded to the room in general and ushered his entourage out, followed by a smiling Deputy Headmistress.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Draco smirked after them feeling quite smug. He turned to be met with a room full of astounded stares.

“What?” He sniffed haughtily, “I can be nice too.”

Roaring laughter answered him.
March gave way to April without any occurrences of grand importance. If one did not count the final passing of the new magical creature legislation that is, which in itself was monumental in terms of progress towards equality in Magical Britain. Needless to say, not everyone was happy with it. Thus, the Minister had decided to give a ball in order to gather some support from the prominent members of society to help pacify the general public.

The ball would take place on Saturday, the twenty-first of April, a day after the start of the Easter holidays, to accommodate some guests of honour, who happened to be still at school. Most notably, one Mr. Harry Potter, who would be accompanied by his esteemed husband, one Professor Snape.

Lord Voldemort closed and folded his paper with an air of satisfaction he had not felt for quite a while. Finally! Finally, his plans could move forward. He had been keeping a low profile for the last six weeks, with the exception of a small raid or two.

For one, his numbers were too few at the moment to risk anything bigger, with the recruiting nearly nonexistent. And secondly, he had been waiting for an opportunity to corner Potter and Snape where he had more or less free access to them and nothing had shown up so far, until now.

Admittedly, a Ministry function was not exactly a public place, nor would it be easily accessible. However, he sincerely doubted that he would get a better chance somewhere in the near future and he was not known to be a patient man.

No, he would strike now! He had had enough of sitting around, wondering when the first of his Death Eaters would start to rebel. He could not afford to wait any longer.

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Harry was sitting at the long table in the main conference room of the Potter manor with his husband by his side, surveying the gathered officers and subordinates of the New Order with a calmness not many of them seemed to feel. The Ministry ball was only an hour away. Thus, those who were to attend were in their dress robes already. The others wore full battle attire and would conduct raids on various Death Eater homes in their owners’ absence.

Their nervousness was understandable. If things went well tonight, this could mean the end of the war with Voldemort once and for all. To match the stakes, the risks they would be taking were quite high as well.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is it...”

“The big one,” twin one interrupted.

“The one we all were looking forward to,” twin two continued in his wake.

Harry could not help but smile in wistful remembrance. Those had been happier times indeed.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Now, as I was saying, tonight we are going to fight the battle that will, if not win us the war, then at least decide it in our favour.”

He looked into their expectant faces allowing himself a small smirk. “As ambitious as it may sound, you know that it is nonetheless true. We all have worked hard, taking over and continuing where the last generation has left off, to bring this mindless conflict to the much desired end. Though, I’m
proud to point out that we have managed to learn from their mistakes and not to repeat them,” he raised his chin a little higher. “I’m proud that we have managed not only to find a bit of wisdom of our own, but also the courage to take an approach we know for sure they would not have approved of.”

He smiled sadly and reached for Severus’ hand. “One of the many things they would not have approved of, I fear.”

The same sadness was reflected in almost everyone’s eyes. No matter the blood status, social standing or house affiliation, one way or another, they all had to rise above their families’ expectations, as well as their own, to find themselves here today, together, sharing one common goal.

“One thing should be added though. What they would or would not have approved of does not really matter. It is our life and our future and what we make of it and how is our own business. How can it be wrong then, if our hearts say it is right?” he asked into the round to be met with many agreeing nods. “No matter what the future may bring tomorrow, never be ashamed of being happy, because what you have now can never be taken from you by any mortal man, unless you allow it.”

Harry got up followed by everyone else. “You all know what you have to do. Stay together, keep your heads screwed on and do not hesitate to kill, and you all shall get through this night alive.”

He gave them one last hard glance.

“Now, let’s go!”

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Tom Marvolo Riddle, Heir of the House Slytherin, Lord Voldemort, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named; the Dark Lord had always prided himself on the fact that every single one of his names and titles had been well earned, even the less desirable ones. He had always known that he was meant for greatness, even as a small child. Though, not being fortunate enough to be born privileged, he had to work long and hard to claim the position he was entitled to by the right of birth and magic.

He had travelled far, had acquired knowledge and artefacts believed long lost and gained wealth and useful acquaintances along the way. He had delved into the darkest of magics with an enthusiasm not many had shown in the past, mainly because they were too afraid to pay the price necessary to gain any real power. He had conquered mighty wizards, mythical beasts and the laws of nature itself. He was the most feared Dark Lord to ever wander the earth! And with Dumbledore finally out of the way there was only one thing standing in his path to the rule of the world, namely The-Brat-Who-Refused-To-Die.

If he were honest with himself, he would admit that he had doubts deep inside, sitting in his throne-like chair surrounded by the dozen handpicked men and women and waiting for the signal to depart. He would admit that sixteen years ago, when the first couple of lines of a prophecy heralding the birth of his supposed vanquisher had been brought to him by one of his spies in Hogsmeade, he might have acted too rashly.

He had obliviated the man after making sure that he had not spoken of it to anyone else and sent him on his way with the promise of great reward for his services, even though the man did no longer remember the specifics. He could not risk word getting out that he was apparently defeatable after all. That would have been a disaster.

He would admit that he had slightly panicked at the time. Well, maybe more than slightly, but now was not the time to split hairs. He had been more concerned about identifying the child and getting
rid of it as quickly as possible, than about trying to obtain the entire prophecy. In hindsight it might have been a huge mistake.

He would admit that he might be making the same mistake again. Rushing forward into the unknown with no plan beyond just killing the brat and his traitor of a husband and be done with it. He still did not know the entire wording of that thrice-damned prophecy and it was worrying him. He would admit that he was acting too rashly again. That there might be something about the boy he did not know, something dangerous.

But he was not honest, not even with himself, thus all the nagging doubts were quickly pushed aside.

If anything, the whole disaster must have been somehow Dumbledore’s fault. Some sort of trap. An elaborate plan to trick him into destroying himself. Because a fifteen-months-old baby just could not have been responsible for that, neither its mudblood mother or blood-traitor father. It must have been the old coot’s doing! There was no other reasonable explanation!

He raised his head slightly when the door opened admitting one of his faithful servants.

“My Lord, everything is set up and ready for your arrival.”

Well, took them long enough!

He rose and stepped down gracefully, heading for the apparation chamber with his followers in tow. He would return victorious tonight or they all would pay dearly, that much he could promise them.

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It was with a heavy heart that Severus forced himself to smile graciously (for him) into the cameras and the many stranger’s faces. The ball was well underway and so far an absolute success. He and Harry had shared a couple of dances, before starting to make rounds around the room, promoting the Minister’s course that also happened to be their own.

He glanced sideways at his beloved, who was sucking up to yet another influential what’s-his-face with seemingly no care in the world. Never mind what they both knew was coming any moment now.

The most bewildering part of it was that his calm was not put on. Unlike Severus, who was working himself up to his first grey hair, Harry was almost looking forward to the confrontation with his second sworn enemy.

Severus suppressed a sigh giving in to the resignation. The upcoming duel would be between his husband and the Dark Lord alone, at a remote location prepared beforehand and without any witnesses, while all that he would be left to do was to stay away and fret, until it was over, one way or another.

If he were honest with himself, Severus was not afraid to leave the dealings with the Dark Lord in Harry’s capable hands. He had done everything possible and even the allegedly impossible to ensure his beloved one’s survival at least, if not the ultimate victory. It was the unpredictable he was afraid of, the whims of the Fates that no mortal had any control over. He was afraid to lose it all this shortly before the goal, just like so many other things in his life. That this dream would end and he would wake up in his dark dungeon room, cold and alone.

A warm, reassuring hand wrapped itself around his, breaking the stream of miserable thoughts. Harry smiled up at him and led him to the dance floor as an excuse to be able to put his arms around him in public. And Severus was grateful for it, despite his promise to himself to be strong tonight. To not
distract his husband with his silly fears. Harry knew him too well to buy it though.

They moved in a graceful tandem, lost in their own world just for a while, where no further responsibilities existed beyond the ones to each other. Hopefully, that world would be a reality one day soon, though Severus doubted it, not for long periods of time at least. There would be always one thing or the other that would take priority. Harry was a Lord and Master to so many. He would not be a good one, if he allowed himself to be selfish too often. But he also knew that no matter what, they would always be together and that was more than enough for him.

When the screams started Severus knew that their time of cosiness was over. One last glance into his husband’s glowing emerald eyes and they parted drawing their wands, ready to do what had to be done.

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It had been ridiculously easy to bypass the Ministry wards. One might think they wanted to give him free entry. Voldemort grinned basking in the chaos around him. Oh, how he had missed this! The cries of terror and pain, the masses fleeing before him, or trying to flee at least, the anti-apparation wards and blocked Floos would prevent that.

He sent a lazy Crucio some poor sod’s way while searching for his prey. And there they were! Further down the hall to his left, behind an overturned buffet table, firing curses at his men with a rather surprising rate of success. With one sweeping motion of his wand-arm everyone in his way, Aurors, guests and even an unfortunate Death Eater, flew into the air and against the nearest wall with a series of satisfactorily sounding cracks.

The enjoyment was cut short though, when a huge ball of fire came at him seemingly out of nowhere, that he barely had time to dispel, stumbling backwards and putting out the sleeves of his robes which still managed to get singed. The enormous power behind it reminded him of Dumbledore so much that just for a split second he believed his old adversary to somehow have found himself in here. But of course that utterly laughable notion was discarded just as quickly. The old goat was still drooling away in his secured ward at St. Mungo’s. So, who had cast it then?

A cautious look around did not reveal any potential threats. No one was even close to his proximity, much less aiming their wand at him. The large ballroom was emptying out far quicker than he had expected. Some alternative routes of escape must have been opened up to the stupid, covering fools then. Not that it mattered of course. He was not here for them.

Voldemort turned towards the overturned buffet table, only to find it abandoned and had to suppress his snarl of annoyance. Now was not the time for dramatics. He had to find Potter and Snape as soon as possible. The sparse skirmishes still going on did not seem to include either of them though.

He made his way further into the room, stepping around bodies and heaps of rumble, making sure to have the wall in his back at all times. Thus, it was quite surprising to suddenly feel a curse incoming directly from behind. He dodged it just in time and threw up a strong shield, which was a good thing, since another one hit it a mere moment later.

The attack was over just as quickly, leaving him angry and frustrated, and quite bewildered as well. He still could not see anyone close by.

He cast a series of revealing spells in quick succession and came out empty. Small tendrils of dread began winding their way around his insides, as he observed the almost empty room before him through narrowed eyes. He did not like that, not at all, and where the hell were his Death Eaters? He could not see a black robed figure anywhere.
He was about to consider to give up and return to the Headquarters, when he felt a strong magical presence appear directly behind him. He whirled around with a curse on the tip of his tongue, only to watch a small object fly towards him and attach itself to his robes. The last thing he saw before he felt the pull behind his navel associated with a Portkey was Potter’s menacingly leering face. And despite everything, he just could not help himself but think that something was definitely and horribly wrong with that picture, when he was whisked away to who knew where.
Voldemort appeared on a smooth, grassy stretch of land in the middle of nowhere it seemed and sent out a wall of fire in all directions, before throwing up a powerful shield. He looked around carefully taking in every detail. The landscape was vast, empty and unfamiliar. Though, he could hazard a guess that it was somewhere more south than north, judged by the mildness of the climate at this time of the year.

The Portkey that had brought him here detached itself from his robes and fell to the ground burning to ashes, leaving him with no way out by that means. The wall of fire he had sent out earlier had hit a wall of light and magic some two hundred feet away and was absorbed by it, leaving a circular arrangement of large, bluish glowing runes on the ground. The only source of light beside the stars above him in a cloudless night sky.

Earth bound containment wards. Exceedingly difficult to bypass, but not impossible for someone like him he mused. That was good news. The only good news so far, but he could work with that at least.

Potter appeared some distance away not a moment later, shrouded in full battle attire and an aura of power he would have never believed him to be in possession of. He doubted though that his senses were deceiving him in that respect. It looked like he had underestimated the boy yet again. What he had not underestimated however was his royal stupidity, seeing as Potter came alone.

Foolish boy! Your Gryffindor arrogance will be your downfall.

Voldemort smirked and raised his wand waiting for the explanation as to what the brat’s intentions were in setting up this little battle arena so far away from any help from his friends and allies. Potter really must be stupid to even attempt to take him down on his own. Raw power was not everything, even if Potter’s should turn out to be greater than his.

What he received was a volley of curses instead.

Very well. Potter was obviously not in a talkative mood. He would wish he had been before the end.

Voldemort dodged the ones that came through his shattered shield and shot a shockwave into the ground to unbalance his opponent, followed by another wall of fire. He was hoping to buy himself the minute of time he needed to weave a complicated pattern of offensive spells that could neither be dodged nor dispelled completely coming in all at once. One of the more advanced skills in his arsenal, reserved only for special circumstances, since most of his enemies were magically too weak to hold their own against him for more than thirty seconds.

Concentrating so hard that he did not notice the barely audible pop of Apparition, he was hit with a silent Confringo from behind, that he felt coming at him a second too late to be able to react properly. His wand ripped from his hand by an Expelliarmus midway through the fall, he was slammed into the ground some thirty feet away.

Before he could even begin to comprehend what had happened or how Apparition could have been possible with containment wards surrounding them, a series of powerful Stunners had sent him into an uncertain oblivion.

xxxoooxxx

Draco Malfoy was standing in front of a moss-grown rock face with a feeling of uncertainty and
nagging discomfort he could not shake off despite his best efforts. It was one of the many secret entrances to Malfoy manor situated about a mile away. Neither Severus nor Lupin behind him was saying a word to hurry him along, though everyone knew that time was of essence.

He took a deep breath and pressed a certain spot with his wand saying the password only a Malfoy would know. A deep crack appeared, widening only enough to let a fully grown, but not too heavy, man through. Draco lit his wand and slipped inside followed by his silent companions, before the opening closed itself on them. The roughly hewn corridor would bring them to one of the lesser, unused studies in the west wing. The closest access to the most frequented parts of the manor, bar those in his father's study and the family bedrooms.

He really should not feel this guilty. He knew his father would not hesitate to Avada Kedavra him on sight, while he himself had made it clear from the very beginning that he would not engage his own father in battle in any way other than a defensive one. That was the reason why Lupin was here, to lend Severus a hand, or wand more like, because he was too much of a sentimental fool to do the dirty work himself.

Draco grimaced and quickened his pace. The sooner they made it there the better. He did not want to think about things too much.

All the Death Eaters accompanying the Dark Lord tonight had been killed rather swiftly and unspectacularly, including his psycho-bitch of an aunt. Only Lucius Malfoy had managed to escape. The last loyal Death Eater of the Inner Circle, the last of the truly dangerous on the side of the Dark, since the Second and Third Circle consisted more of brawn than brains or power. And it was not very hard to guess where he had fled to.

About half an hour later Draco had opened another tightly secured entrance, revealing a small, sparsely furnished study. The two older men carefully made their way up the stairs to the third floor, where the Point Me had indicated Lucius to be, leaving Draco to close the tunnel behind them. Unable to stand still and wait, he followed them a couple of minutes later.

The sight greeting him in the Master bedroom was not the one he had expected though. On the huge, luxurious bed half-lay his father, still in his dirty and torn Death Eater robes, propped up against some pillows. His skin had a pasty grey colour ever only associated with death. A vial of apparently some sort of poison was tightly clutched in his stiff hand. Severus was casting diagnostic charms over the body in quick succession, while Lupin was guarding his back.

“Do you think it’s really him?” Lupin asked, though doubt was colouring his voice.

Severus only scoffed in response and Draco had to agree after the moment of initial shock had passed. No way in hell!

“My money is on Polyjuice combined with a scattering and confounding spell or two. Just believable enough for the Ministry fools to buy into,” Severus stepped back and turned to face them. “By the time it wears off in a couple of days all trails would be long cold.”

Hit by a sudden insight Draco hurried out of the room and down the stairs. “Come on! Let’s have a look at the study. If we are in luck, we might still get him.”

It turned out that he was right on the spot. One of the Portkeys to their summer home in Italy was a fake as well.

He held out another one for the two men to grasp, tightened the grip on his wand and activated it, sending them all to the entrance hall of the Malfoy villa in Rimini.
The last thing he saw before all hell broke loose was his father’s face frozen in wide-eyed surprise.

Voldemort finally came to himself, to a blurry vision and an aching body to be specific, not to mention a hellish migraine. The first attempt to move revealed him to be magically restrained, causing his head to clear immediately due to a heavy boost of adrenaline.

He seemed to have been placed in the middle of some sort of ritual set-up. Looking closer he could identify parts of it to belong to rituals influencing mental abilities. Potter was close by, though busy with his preparations and not paying him any attention. Thus, he dared to test the bindings holding him down as inconspicuously as possible. He was quite positive that he could break them given time. Time he did not have much of though, seeing as Potter had finally looked up and graced him with a smirk, pausing in his work.

Whatever was the meaning of this, it could hardly be anything good. He had to stall Potter by any means possible. The only option available to him at the moment however was talking. Nevertheless, ‘What are you doing?’ would be a rather stupid question to ask, since it was fairly obvious what the brat was doing here. So, he settled on something that was puzzling him for real.

“How were you able to apparate within containment wards?”

Potter grinned at him like a loon. “Magic.”

Voldemort blinked disturbed on levels that he did not know he still had. If that was even close to sane, then he was St. Mungo himself.

Potter’s grin widened if possible.

“Well, since you want to know so badly...” he returned his attention to the ritual site, but did not stop talking. “It’s all due to my mother’s sacrifice. She must have invoked the powers of Dana to aid in her protection of me and as you undoubtedly know, Dana is the Great Mother, the Earth itself.”

“Does it make a click?” He snapped his fingers in Voldemort’s face, annoying him beyond reason. “Earth bound wards?”

Voldemort gritted his teeth seething, but had to remind himself that it was he who was supposed to distract Potter, not the other way around. He had to focus his mind and magic on disabling the bindings once again.

Almost there! Just a little bit further...

Potter finished whatever he was doing and straightened up brandishing his wand at him. It was such a cliché gesture that he could not help himself guffawing in derision.

“What exactly do you think you are doing here, boy? Trying to kill me? What with, may I ask? Love?” He laughed a bit longer reminiscing about the old man and his idiotic philosophy. “You cannot kill me, boy, no one can. Even if you destroy this body tonight, I will rise once again before the week is out.”

Potter’s own grin did not diminish though.

“So sure of our immortality, are we? So confident. Just like our old pals, the Dementors, hm,” he simpered tut-tutting. “So safe in the knowledge that no one is aware of the steps we took to achieve it. Isn’t it so?”
Voldemort blanched in sheer horror. *Impossible! No one knows, no one! I have made sure of it.*

As if reading his thoughts, Potter chuckled and shook his head. “Typical. So focused on one thing only, that he’s unable to think outside of the box. Dumbledore was exactly like that too, you know.”

The glowing emerald gaze pinning him down was full of insolent amusement. “You want to know how I gained the knowledge to kill the Dementors? Don’t you?”

Voldemort did not dare to breathe.

“I’ve done the one thing no one else has thought of doing before of course,” Potter paused for the effect leaning slightly forward. “I’ve simply asked.”

Voldemort stared at him in absolute disbelief.

Potter’s smirk was the epitome of smugness. “Well, *asked* is a bit of a stretch actually,” his face transformed into an ugly mask within a blink of an eye. “I’ve ripped the knowledge out of their minds.”

Eyes widening in panicked understanding Voldemort strengthened his Occlumency shields, or tried to at least. The ritual candles flared into life with a swish of Potter’s wand, loosening his hold on his mental defences. A moment later his world exploded in pain when the forefront of his mind was brutally invaded by the boy.

Gathering up his scattered might he threw himself head on into battle. Challenging him on his own turf? The blasted brat was going to regret the day he was born!

xxxooxxx

The first rays of the rising morning sun were creeping over the tops of the dense evergreen forest. Greyback’s cave was somewhere ahead of them or so their intelligence had reported. Hermione did not know if she should hope for it to be true or not. There was no telling what would be expecting them there.

She looked around into the tense faces of her comrades. They all were just barely running on Wide-Awake Potion and adrenaline by now, undoubtedly wishing to be home in their beds and far away from here. But this had to be done and it had to be done now.

Bill was in charge of the operation, seeing as neither Severus nor Remus had been found appropriate, due to their rather personal association with the matter at hand. Both of them had protested of course, but Hermione could only agree with Harry’s decision. They needed someone with a cool head and temper or things might get quite ugly from one moment to another.

They were thirty people. Every single one a top duellist and with the exception of some adult Hogwarts students like herself, rather experienced in battle. Harry did not want to take any chances with this one and understandably so.

Under any other circumstances Hermione would have resented a place in the second row, but carefully moving forward, minding her step on the uneven ground, assigned to watch Tonks’ back, she could not find it in herself to complain.

The attack came so fast that all what she had time to see were a dozen blurred shapes breaking through the underbrush and slamming into the hastily erected shields of the front line men and women. Spells and curses exploded like a firework all around her, forcing her out of her stupor and into action guided more by instinct than anything else. It was in good time too, since she had nearly
lost sight of her partner and had to run to reach Tonks again, deflecting an incoming curse with a well placed Protego.

The werewolves of Greyback’s pack fought like wild animals, barely even using their wands. Greyback himself certainly had not one anywhere in sight. The fighters of the New Order however were ordered to use lethal force, which in most cases meant a quick Avada Kedavra, putting down the half-transformed werewolves like flies.

Just as fast as it began it was over. Hermione could only stand there and stare in shock at the dead bodies of the enemy and the bloody moving and moaning ones of their troops, in some cases mauled quite heavily. Bill was holding his shredded left arm tightly against his chest and giving orders to transport the severely wounded to St. Mungo’s immediately.

“Everyone else, with me, now! We have to secure the cave, before we can leave ourselves!”

Jolted into action once again Hermione followed his retreating back on half-automatic, too out of it still to think properly. The dark opening in the looming rock was just ahead and they all lit their wands, before entering carefully. The cave turned out to be quite spacey and deep. Trash and all sorts of loot were littering every available bit of walls and floor. That aside, it seemed to be empty though.

Bill turned and opened his mouth probably to finally dismiss them when there was a startled squeak behind him. Whirling around he pointed his wand in the direction. The wandlight fell on three pairs of terrified eyes watching them out of small, trembling faces.

Harry pulled out of Voldemort’s mind and fell to his knees throwing up all over the place. What he had seen there was too much for the most hardened of men, much less for someone so young and inexperienced still, despite everything. After his heaving had finally subsided he began casting Cleaning Charms like there was no tomorrow, feeling sullied to his very bones and not just by vomit and drenching sweat either.

When he was finally done he breathed a heavy sigh and looked over the unconscious body in front of him. Voldemort was still out cold and would remain so for a little while. Just long enough for him to decide on the further course of action, since what he had found was not exactly what he had expected to see. No, not at all.

Who would have thought that the bastard had gone so far as to make a deal with Sucellos himself to ensure his immortality? Well, immortality for the duration of his natural lifespan to be precise. Apparently, there was no such thing as a real immortality, not for humans at least. The price though... Harry shuddered. Merlin, how could have anyone done that! How could he...

He stopped himself deliberately. It made him sick and dirty all over to just think about it.

But still. The question remained as to what to do now. For all his power Harry did not have anything to put up against the Gods themselves.

Voldemort moaned and stirred slowly. Sighing Harry hit him with a Stunner and disabled the containment wards.

“Winky.”

The elf popped into existence right in front of him. “Yous is calling, Master Harry?”
“Yes, please go to Severus’ private laboratory and fetch me a Draught of Living Death.”

“Of course, Master Harry.” She disappeared and reappeared a moment later holding out the required vial.

“Thank you, that would be all.”

She bowed and left barely making a sound.

Harry cast a Rennervate and spelled the potion directly into Voldemort’s stomach, as soon as he had opened his eyes. The eyes closed again and a fake rigor mortis set in. Harry sighed in temporary relief. A more permanent solution would have to wait, it had been a long and gruelling night after all. The next question was where to put him for the time being of course.

A moment later he had his answer. The only place safe enough would be the holding cells in the dungeon of 12 Grimmauld Place. He grabbed into the body grinning at the thought of old Mrs. Black’s reaction, if she were still around to see him come in with her precious Dark Lord thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

A moment later they were both gone.
Facing the Future

It was long past breakfast on Saturday morning when Harry finally woke up and stretched languidly in his and Severus’ bed in their family quarters at Hogwarts. Despite the nice lie in, he was still tired from the stressful week following the Ministry ball and would have turned to his side and went right back to sleep, if not for the incessant rambling of his empty stomach.

Severus was out cold next to him making him smile as he watched his half-covered chest rise and fall peacefully. For all his insistences that he was a very light sleeper Harry doubted even a cannon blast would be able to rouse him right now.

Slipping out from under the covers carful as to not disturb him Harry pulled his dressing gown over his nude body and shuffled into the bathroom to relieve himself and clean up, before shuffling towards the dining room just as listlessly.

Several cups of a strong tea later he was more or less back among the living and dug into his toast, eggs and sausages with gusto. It was rather nice to have devoted and unfailing personal service at his beck and call he mused, especially when one had absolutely no energy to do anything for oneself. Hermione really should rethink that stance of hers, though he seriously doubted that S.P.E.W. was anywhere on her mind at the moment.

It had been unanimously decided that the werewolf children they had found in Greyback’s cave would not be handed over to the Ministry. Instead, they would be adopted and raised by willing New Order members, since their families were either dead or did not want to have anything to do with them. The later made Harry exceptionally angry, but he refrained from doing anything about it, for now at least. He had already several adjustments to the current Child Protection Laws in mind and Merlin help those selfish, bigoted sods when he and the new Child Care Services were through with them!

Well, he would have to line up behind Hermione he supposed. She had gone absolutely ballistic hearing about it. He would not be surprised to see a completely written out preliminary draft to an entire chain of bills on his table before the week was out.

He should encourage her to study Law after Hogwarts instead of Mediwizardry she had originally in mind. She would be of more use to him in the near future as a secretary and advisor. Especially, once he had ascended the Minister of Magic’s office. Thinking further about it, he could probably sell it to her saying that she would do far more good for the people that way than by working with them directly. On the other hand, there really was nothing stopping her from studying both. She was Hermione after all and it was not like she would have to stay in the politics forever. He himself did not plan to hold more than one term, two at most, depending on how long it would take to realise all their reforms. Afterwards, he had every ambition to retire to leisurely pulling the strings behind the scenes, preferably working from home.

He smirked dreamily into his cup. Even more preferably from the bed, using Severus’ slender back as a desk. He doubted Severus would mind.

“Do I even want to know what you are smirking about?” His husband’s familiar drawl sounded from the open doorway.

“Good morning to you too, my sleeping beauty,” he stretched up to peck him on the lips ignoring the expected derisive snort. The pleased smile in Severus’ eyes whenever he used terms of endearment to address him was belying any scorn expressed about it.
Severus sat down and busied himself with a generous breakfast, obviously hungry as well, while he opened the today’s paper studiously ignoring the twenty stacks of letters next to it. Severus usually helped him with his correspondence only after he had eaten well and truly and not a second before.

The news was nothing much different from what had been covering the front page for the last couple of days. Attack on the Ministry ball, You-Know-Who was dead (in bold letters), Harry Potter saved them all once again, the body was supposedly in the Ministry’s custody, most high profile Death Eaters dead or missing, the rest being rounded up, the war was over, hail the hero and the DMLE (as an afterthought), and so on and so forth, plus a lot of rumours and speculation as to what exactly had happened.

Harry had narrated a carefully crafted overview of his duel with Voldemort and subsequent victory in front of the Minister and his cabinet, telling them that he had been kidnapped to some strongly warded place and that was why the Ministry had not been able to register any use of underage magic on his part. Then, he showed them the body, but refused to hand it over for further study. The Head of the Department of Mysteries had protested the loudest of course, though Harry had been able to silence them all by effectively pulling an Albus, saying that some knowledge was better lost forever. No one seemed to have anything to argue against that ambiguous bit of wisdom. Harry had been barely able to contain his smirk.

The statement released to the press and the following conferences had the entire wizarding world firmly convinced that Voldemort was now dead for good and his remaining Death Eaters being taken care of. And Harry had every intention to make sure that it remained that way. What they did not know could not hurt them after all.

The whole truth was known only to him and Severus.

After a long and thorough discussion they had decided against revealing it to anyone else. Matters of security aside, people simply needed closure. All of them, friends and strangers alike, would be able to move on with their lives far better in the absolute belief that it was now well and truly over.

Voldemort was currently held under heavy wards and the Draught of Living Death at a small cottage under Fidelius, the Secret-Keeper of which was Harry himself. The potion needed to be administered every week together with the necessary nutritional potions to keep him alive and subdued until the end of his natural lifespan. That should be unfortunately a good century from now. Overall, not the worst burden to bear though.

The celebrations still in full swing, the number of the injured fighters of the New Order at St. Mungo’s had gone unnoticed, which was a very good thing, seeing as they’d rather avoid any uncomfortable questions. It had been decided to continue to operate in the shadows, since it was more safe and convenient that way. The number of casualties on their side had been surprisingly small and blessedly none from his personal circle of friends. Despite his best planning, Harry had not expected the operations to go as well as they did. Thank Merlin and every other deity for that! And most importantly of course, Severus was alive and whole at his side by the end of day.

Harry watched him eat feeling love and happiness flutter in his stomach. He really could not even begin imagining a life without him and begged that the Fates stayed favourable in the future, so he never would have to.

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The funeral was a small and quiet affair. Draco stood by the stone slab marking the last resting place of his father’s remains at their family cemetery a while longer than the rest of the sparse yield of attendants. Even his mother did not feel the need to linger and preceded him towards the small café
they had booked to hold the traditional meal in the late man’s honour. His godfather had decided to stay away for decency’s sake, seeing as he had been the one who had delivered the killing blow. Despite carrying a part of that guilt, Draco could not afford to do the same.

The body had been incinerated and put into earth in a simple wooden casket, as was customary for Malfoys, mainly to prevent its use, or abuse, for rituals of any kind. Most families did not observe that simple precaution and Draco could only marvel at their stupidity. The purebloods at least should know better.

He sighed and turned away starting to walk past the neatly arranged rows of graves towards the gate. The feelings inside him warred between relief and sadness. Relief that his father’s madness had been finally put an end to and sadness that it had been necessary in the first place.

He could clearly remember the man his father had been in his childhood days. The obvious flaws aside, Lucius Malfoy had been indeed someone who could inspire respect and admiration in children and adults alike, or at least the ones in his direct sphere of influence. The others Draco had no contact with until he had started Hogwarts, thus it was no wonder that his worldview had been so hopelessly biased. And yet he had somehow managed to obtain a bit of levelheadedness. Just enough to be able to move past the pedestal his boy-self had put both his parents on and see things for what they were and not what they were supposed to be. He had Severus to thank for that he imagined.

Severus had really done well by him, obviously taking his duty as a godfather very seriously. He shuddered to think where he would be right now if not for him.

The gate closed behind him as soon as he walked past it. There was a fireplace in the gatehouse connected to the Floo Network just for the day for the attendants’ convenience. Thus, he made his way towards it.

On a happier note, the wedding date had been set already. July the 15th. Draco smiled at the thought of a lengthy honeymoon in Greece and the prospect of family quarters at Hogwarts come September the first.

His mother was a bit jealous of the Weasley matriarch for having a daughter to marry off in all appropriate glory he could tell, though she was hiding it masterfully. As he had anticipated, she had decided to retire to her dowager manor instead of staying with them. She was still quite young though and undoubtedly very beautiful. He supposed he would not mind if she chose to remarry sometime in the near future and maybe even have that daughter she wished for, to doll up to her heart’s content.

He locked the gatehouse door securely behind him and activated the wards, before throwing a handful of glittering Floo Powder into the tall fireplace, stepping into it and disappearing with a whoosh of green flames.

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“Good evening, Headmistress. I hope you can spare a moment of time?”

Harry went up to Professor McGonagall’s new office right after dinner to discuss a bit of business he had nearly forgotten about with everything else on his mind.

“For you always, Harry,” she smiled warmly and offered him tea and a seat, the former of which he declined.

“Well, I was hoping to be able to take my N.E.W.T.s this year actually and wanted to ask, if it’s not
too late to submit a formal request.”

After the second bonding his classes had been all but a breeze for him and not having the war effort to concentrate on anymore, he had no doubt that he would be bored to death sitting in them every day. The N.E.W.T. examinations took place at the end of May thankfully. Besides, he wanted to go into politics as soon as he had turned seventeen to begin laying down the groundwork for the second stage of the New Order’s agenda. He would be wasting his time staying for another year at school, both he and Severus had agreed on that.

The Headmistress’ eyebrows rose impossibly high, though she had far too much dignity to start spluttering incoherently of course.

“Well,” she cleared her throat and composed herself visibly to remain professional, “it is not too late to submit a request yet, but are you sure you will be able to pass them to your satisfaction, young man?”

Her tone of voice betrayed her doubts in that regard. Though, after years of mediocrity in everything but Defence he could not blame her he supposed. She and many others were in for quite a surprise.

He smirked inside, but made sure to present nothing but calm confidence to her. “I’m pretty sure I can handle them sufficiently, Professor. I would not have asked otherwise.”

“If you are sure,” she still sounded doubtful, took out the required form and a spare quill nevertheless. “Please fill this out and sign with your magic. I will forward it to the Wizarding Examinations Authority Office for you.”

“Thank you, Professor!”

Harry was genuinely happy that she did not try to put sticks into his wheels despite her misgivings. On the other hand, he was well aware that this was actually cheating, since none of the straight O’s he undoubtedly was going to attain would be on his own merit. And even though no one outside of the New Order would know that, and Severus himself had assured him that he did not mind, his conscience demanded the debt to be settled in full, plus interest.

Harry hid the sly little smile tugging at his lips as he handed over the signed paper and the quill to the elder woman and thanked her profoundly again, before taking his leave, having an idea or two already on his mind how to go about that.

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Hermione lay awake in her husband’s arms despite the late hour and a rather pleasant exhaustion. Her over-analytical mind was giving her no respite, no matter how much she wanted it to. She sighed exasperatedly and buried herself deeper into the rhythmically rising and falling chest, stubbornly trying to escape her madly whirling thoughts into sleep. Sleep however had other ideas, thus giving her no other option but to give in.

They had sneaked into the Room of Requirement tonight, because it had been over a week since their last time together and though Theo had not said anything, she could plainly see that he was sulking and had decided to take pity on him. If she was honest with herself, she had missed him as well, and not just the sex, but also the comfort his arms and the look of undying devotion in his eyes was always giving her.

Her thoughts focused back on the series of monumental events this past week consisted of. First and foremost, the operation at the Ministry ball and the blessed result they all had been hoping for. She
still had trouble believing that it was now over, that Voldemort was truly dead and will not return ever again to threaten them and their future. Though, she supposed the people who had lived through the first war had even more difficulties with the concept than her.

Next was the raid on Greyback’s cave of course. That too had yielded the much desired result, even though the cost had been much higher this time. She shuddered slightly when the memories of that early morning assaulted her inner eye. She had thought that her parents’ torture and murder had been gruesome to watch. That was actually nothing against the bloody chaos of the first rate massacre she had actually participated in. In her opinion, that she did not seem to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder was evidence enough to just how unhinged she herself had become. She and her husband must be quite a pair now. Hopefully, they would not try to give the Lestranges a run for their money anytime soon. She smirked into her chest pillow humoured despite the morbidity. Merlin, what the world had come to!

She sighed pushing any further disturbing reflections deeper into the background of her mind in the hope they would stay there forever. A vain hope, she knew that much without the slightest bit of doubt.

The week following had been a whirlwind of happiness for the survivors, anxiety for the injured, sadness for the dead, excessive celebrations and endless hours of cover-up work. The Ministry and the public had been expertly left in the dark as to what had actually transpired and how. Harry had cemented his image as the knight in shining armour and his position as everyone’s darling so firmly that he would go scot-free with anything but murder. And even that he could get away with, if he put his mind to it she supposed. The continued secrecy of the New Order had been an additional bonus that could be made use of most advantageously in the future.

All things considered, the first part of their agenda had been concluded most successfully. The reformation of the British wizarding world’s current political and social structure was up next and from there the rest of the magical world would hopefully follow, inspired by their shining example.

The later was just an idealistic dream of hers she feared, though one could never know. There was more than one example of something similar happening in the past, so one should not lose hope entirely. If anyone could make it happen, it would be definitely Harry Potter. Doubly so, with Severus Snape by his side and the rest of them in the background.

She and Theo had decided to announce their marriage this summer, mostly with the prospect of their very own family quarters in mind. This sneaking about for a shag was most bothersome indeed. They had yet to be caught by the staff, but the possibility was always there. So, why putting up with it, if there was no need anymore?

The images of their own apartment and all the possibilities it would open turned into sweet, if somewhat naughty, dreams as she finally drifted off. A happy smile was curving her lips for Theodore to wake up to in the morning, quite pleased to have been the one to put it there.
Pictures of Domestic Bliss

Harry’s 17th birthday celebration at Potter manor went over splendidly. A loud and boisterous affair that Severus had excused himself from as soon as it was polite to do so. His low tolerance for noisy crowds notwithstanding, he had the preparations for his own very special gift to finish.

In the past three months he had undergone a treatment to acquire a temporary womb, that he had yet to tell his husband about. He wanted a baby and he wanted to conceive it in the hour of his beloved birth, both as a gift to him and to secure a blessing for their child’s glorious future.

That he had done it behind his back and in the full knowledge that Harry would be insanely pleased and not angry or worse, scornful, was quite telling as to how far he had come confidence-wise. Only half a year ago he would have never dared.

He drank the fertility potion and exhaled a nervous breath running his hand over his well toned, still flat stomach, waiting for Harry to see the last of their guests off and come up to the Master bedroom. It was an hour before midnight and fifteen minutes before Harry drew his first breath. They did not have much time. He probably should have told Harry that it was important, when asking him this morning to come and find him after the party he supposed. He would have to send a house-elf to fetch him before too long. Just as he was about to call one, Harry tumbled through the door chuckling drunkenly and threw his arms around him to embrace him and steady himself at the same time.

“Ah, here you are, my lovely,” he slurred kissing him sloppily. “I thought you had something special for me, so why are you not naked?” He slipped his hand into Severus’ sleeping pants going for his cock with shameless determination.

“Harry... ah... there is something... I need to tell you...” The hand tugging on his rapidly swelling member was rather distracting. “Harry... ah... wait...”

“Huh,” Harry squinted up at him in confusion, but stopped what he was doing. Severus was torn between telling him now and telling him later for a moment, but then decided that he did not want their child conceived in a drunken tumble. He sighed and stepped away reaching for a sobering potion.

“I have another birthday present for you, love, but you have to be sober to receive it.”

Harry pouted adorably, obviously reluctant to give up his alcohol-induced state of bliss, but drank it anyway. A moment later he was looking at him in eager expectation.

Severus drew a deep breath. “I want to give you a child.”

It took only a moment of shocked silence until Harry’s eyes widened in sudden comprehension and he was swapped away into a bone-crashing hug. Then, the arms holding him loosened and his face was cupped lovingly.

Severus swallowed heavily. “I...”

He was silenced with a gentle kiss. Then, pulled towards the bed and lowered on it without a word. Emerald eyes shone with an overwhelming deep emotion, the intensity of which took his breath away, as clothes were removed and his entire body worshiped, before a slickened finger entered him in preparation.
Harry took him slowly, looking into his eyes while he adjusted himself to the familiar length. Then, he started thrusting into him with an easy going pace. Their lovemaking was unhurried, yet nonetheless intense. Harry’s burning gaze watched him drown in pleasure and come undone in his arms, before finally disappearing behind tightly closed eyelids, when he followed him over the edge.

They lay there for a while gasping for breath and holding each other in a tight embrace. Then, Harry finally slipped out of him and cast a cleaning spell. Green eyes found his own again, this time glittering with happiness.

“Thank you, my love. It’s the best gift ever.”

“Wait until it is here and drives you up the walls with its incessant wails at all times of night and day. And then it grows up and starts pulling all sorts of grey hair inducing stunts, just like its sire did in his time. Then, you may thank me.”

Harry spooned him, wrapping an arm around his stomach protectively.

“Well, at least it won’t be such a quiet, moody, book-loving swot its father was in his time. That would be boring.”

“You say that now,” Severus grumbled tiredly into his pillow, a happy little smile tugging at his lips. “There will come a time you shall hope for exactly that. Mark my words.”

“Such an optimist,” Harry kissed his temple and settled down to sleep.

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It was the end of August and they were due to return to Britain tomorrow, before the start of the next school year. The wedding had been a fairy-tale and the honeymoon even better, with the exception of this morning when she had started throwing up and could barely stop.

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the fine porcelain bowl. The hard marble floor of the bathroom was not the most comfortable place to rest, though she could not bring herself to move, lest it offsets her stomach again.

The door opened and Draco came in with a vial of stomach-calming potion in his hand. Thank Merlin! She reached her hand out for it almost frantically.

“Here, let me,” he uncorked it and helped her drink fearing she might drop it in the state she was in.

He was only hoping it was something she had eaten recently and not something else. Ginny was apparently thinking along the same lines. She stood up and let herself be helped into bed.

“Cast the spell,” she ordered grumblingly.

Draco gulped uncomfortably and fumbled for his wand.

“Are you sure it’s not just a see-food salad gone off, darling?”

He really, really did not want to be in his shoes, if it was not the case. He should not have bought that last batch of contraceptive potion in the Knockturn Alley apothecary the last time he was there, because he had been too lazy to go back to Slug & Jiggers in Diagon.

Ginny’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Cast the bloody spell, Draco.”

He took a deep breath praying to everything divine to spare him and cast the pregnancy test spell.
Ginny’s stomach lit up in baby-blue (no pun intended). Draco gulped again, this time in fear.

“Draco, darling, where did you get that last batch of contraceptives from?” The voice was deceptively sweet.

“...”

“**DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY, YOU CAN KISS YOUR BALLS GOODBYE!**”

The graduation ball of 1998 was in full swing and the press coverage quite extensive, even though Harry had graduated last year. However, he and Severus were here and where they were the press was.

Hermione smiled watching the people before her mingle and dance, waiting for Theo to bring her the traditionally spiked punch, very happy to be able to drink some. Unlike Ginny, who was pregnant with her second unplanned child (her fault this time though) and thus forced to stick with pumpkin juice. Little Arcturus Draco Malfoy was at home watched by his very enthusiastic grandmother.

Both Ginny and Draco had dropped out of school last year to study under private tutors; Ginny for obvious reasons and Draco out of solidarity, or so he had said. Hermione suspected that he simply had not wanted to deprive himself of his marital bed for nearly nine months. No wonder they were on their second already, shagging like rabbits in heat. Neville and Luna at least were showing more restraint, with him waiting for her to finish her schooling before marriage.

She and Theodore were planning to have their first child in a year’s time, when she was in her first year of Magical Law Academy. They wanted to take the entire coming year to travel the world and enjoy a glorious lack of responsibility and obligations, before settling down into life and career. She would have put it off for later, but Theo insisted that they needed to do that now or they never would otherwise. She had a feeling that he was right.

Harry and Severus finished their dance and made their way towards the table next to hers, apparently needing a break. The pregnancy had not been easy on Severus and even now, almost three month after giving birth to their son, Alexander, he still tired easily. They both had decided that their second child would be carried by Harry and she could only agree. Harry’s pride as the dominant partner was simply not worth the risk. Not that it would be anytime soon with Harry knee deep in politics right now, though probably sometime before him running for the Minister’s of Magic office, after Scrimgeour’s term had ended.

Theo placed two glasses of punch on the table and sat down next to her smiling.

“A Knut for your thoughts.”

She smiled back at him. “Just reflecting on the future.”

“And? Is it a good one?”

“Yes,” she took his hand into hers, “yes, it is.”

15 years later:

“Ahhhhhhhhhh....”
“Push, darling, just a little more, the head is already crowning!”

The midwife was meaning well she knew, but with the pain wreaking through her lower section for the last six hours she had simply no patience left. Oh, how he would pay for this!

“The first one you mean! There are two of them after all!” Ginny spat out unimpressed panting heavily, before taking a deep breath, gripping Draco’s hand harder, ignoring his wince, and pushing again.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh....”

The bastards had taken her wand away or she would have hexed her husband’s balls off again. Draco had his testicles reapplied no less than six times during their marriage, therefore they knew very well what they were doing.

Draco and Ginevra Malfoy were indeed well known at St. Mungo’s. He, for being the only husband ever cursed with the Testicle Removing Hex for other reasons than cheating and she, for being the witch, who had singlehandedly rejuvenated the declining House Malfoy, currently giving birth to child seven and eight.

The wail of the first boy sounded through the ward.

“Ah, good, good,” the midwife cut and healed the umbilical cord and handed the infant to her assistant. “Now, take a breather and concentrate, darling, we are not done yet.”

Ginny took a deep breath and ruthlessly squeezed her wincing husband’s hand. The bastard deserved all the pain he got in her opinion.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh....”

Five more minutes and the second boy was wailing in the midwife’s hands.

“Well done, darling, two healthy, handsome boys! Now only the afterbirth and the restorative potion left, and you all can finally rest.”

“Oh, no, Martha, we are not done yet! Make me an appointment for spaying next week at the very latest!”

The midwife blinked surprised, but grinned anyway. “Are you sure you want that, darling?”

“Yes! I had enough! Eight bloody children and not even one of them planned! Never in my life have I thought that I would surpass my mother in that. If not for that heinously expensive restorative draught, I would look like an elephant by now!”

She narrowed her eyes at her cringing husband. “Either that or I’ll hex his balls off and this time for good.”

Draco blanched and straightened up, taking the threat very seriously. “Please, make the appointment for next week, Martha. Eight children are more than enough, indeed.”

“As you wish, my Lord,” the woman’s eyes danced with mirth. “Now, let me see that hand.”

“Ronnie, when are you going to finally do something with yourself?”
Ronald Weasley was sitting in his mother’s kitchen, munching on his breakfast. He was the only one of her many children still living at home.

“Lay off, mum. Not everyone has a pretty face and can run off and marry filthy rich ferrets.” It was his standard answer to that question. “Besides, I’m doing something, am I not? I’m working at Fred and George’s.”

“As a part-time assistant, Ronnie. When are you going to get yourself a proper job or at least do some sort of apprenticeship? We can afford to pay for any you could possibly want now. Have you given it any thought?”

“I’m thinking about it, mum, but I really like it at the shop, so why bother?”

“You must think about your future, Ronnie. What about meeting a nice girl and settling down together? You wouldn’t be able to afford that on your current pay.”

“When I meet that girl, then I’ll be thinking about it, mum. Food’s getting cold, you know.”

Molly Weasley sighed and turned away in despair honestly asking herself what she had done to be saddled with such a lazy brat. She needed to talk to Arthur. This had gone on long enough.

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30 years later:

“Ronnie, when are you going to finally do something with yourself?”

Ronald Weasley was sitting in his mother’s kitchen and munching on his breakfast. The world had changed around them for the better many times over, and he was the only one of her many children still living at home.

Works inspired by this one

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