Shadows Within the Light

by Sensiblytainted

Summary

After 4th year, Harry was left barely alive after being tortured by Voldemort in the graveyard. Fortunately, he has a safe place to heal with Severus. He’s unwilling to continue being Harry Potter and becomes Shadow Snape instead. He still has difficult battles ahead, Voldemort has not yet been defeated and he still has two other personalities sleeping in his mind, but he also discovers love in the form of his best friend Draco Malfoy.
Shadows Within the Light

Harry had spent the two weeks after the Third Task mostly in a healing, dreamless sleep. He remembered snippets of Remus and Sirius changing his bandages, helping him drink potions, and helping him bathe, but, thankfully, he was too numb and exhausted - not to mention in pain- to really take notice of everything happening around him. His whole world had narrowed to his broken body's needs and demands.

But for the last two days, awareness had flirted with his consciousness. He was managing to stay awake and actually converse with Remus and Sirius. He even talked Omi into fetching him newspapers and had been shocked further awake at the news printed there. The wizarding world was rabid with panic; torn practically in half between believers of Voldemort's return and those that believed it was just a vicious rumor.

Harry didn't know which category he was in. He had no recollections of the night in the graveyard just a vague sense of icy terror. He tried asking Remus and Sirius, but they only offered him reassurances of his safety and insisted it was best he not think of anything right now but his recovery. It was maddening.

And then Severus had arrived on his third day of coherency.

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Severus stepped into his house. Immediately the weight of the problems he carried slid from his shoulders. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and allowing the muscles in his shoulders and neck to loosen. Taking off his outer robe, he called for Omi. The little elf took it solemnly, following as Severus made his way slowly upstairs. His leg still bothered him and gave him a small limp.

He went left, walked down the hall, and stopped at Harry's open door. Remus was sitting in a chair pulled up to the teen's bedside, reading a thick book on medi-wizardry. The mutt was in his human form and snoring softly in a cot pushed against the wall. The curtains on the windows were pulled half-closed, softening the harsh summer sun.

Still without speaking, he stepped into the room and stopped at the foot of the bed. Lupin looked up at him, but he didn't say anything. Severus appreciated that and just took in his charge. Harry's face was thin and relaxed with sleep. His hair was messy from being in bed so much and the teen's exposed chest was covered with bandages. Some areas were even stained red with fresh blood. No doubt his legs were in the same condition.

"He's doing better," Lupin offered. "He's not in as much pain. He’s awake almost all day now. In fact, he should wake up from his nap any moment."

"How much is permanent?" He asked it so softly he feared Lupin wouldn't hear him.

"Very little. Maybe none.” The werewolf smiled. "Really, there was hardly any internal damage and all the surface injuries are responding slowly to treatment."

Severus nodded. He couldn't say anything else as startling green eyes blinked open. They had changed. They were brighter, more vivid, and almost inhuman. Lupin rose without being asked and got the mutt up and out of the room with surprisingly little fuss. Severus waited until the door closed
behind them before taking the seat the werewolf had abandoned. Harry watched him, his expression tense, but he managed a smile for his mentor.

"How are you?" Severus asked carefully.

Harry ducked his head, his long bangs hiding his unsettling eyes as his hands twisted in the blankets at his lap. "I'm doing better. I even walked around for a bit today."

"I'm pleased to hear it." He waited, wondering how Harry wanted this exchange to go.

"I've been stealing the Daily Prophet," the teen admitted in a soft, steady voice. "Remus and Sirius order it. They read it down stairs, thinking I don't know. Remus worries the news will upset me and make me ill, so I get Omi to bring it to me when they leave me alone in the bath."

"It's understandable that you want to know what's going on," Severus allowed, keeping his face and voice neutral.

"I'm glad you think that because I want to know the truth about what happened that night." Harry lifted his head, staring at Severus with a silent demand for answers.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"Cedric activated the Cup. It took us to a dark graveyard. I hid because someone was coming." He looked away, toward the window. "I started to use my ring when…" He shrugged and looked back at his teacher. "I don't remember anything else, but…"

"But what, Harry?"

"When I try to remember that night or when I think about it too hard, I get cold and scared. I know I don't want to remember." Harry met his mentor's dark eyes. "But I have to know. I'm in danger, and I don't know what I'm up against."

Severus nodded and leaned back in the chair. He had expected this and had already made his decision. "I will tell you what I know."

Harry listened, staring at his teacher as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Severus started at the beginning. Harry’s hands clenched into tight fists as he described the duel with Dumbledore. He hissed furiously as Severus recounted how his leg was injured. Severus had been staring at the wall, lost in his recollections, but at the sound he tipped his head down and stared intensely at the teen.

"What?" Harry scowled, startled by the look and not understanding why he was getting it. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Draco Malfoy chose that moment to arrive on the scene," Severus said evenly. He watched Harry's eyes get wider, but there was very little reaction as he described the headmaster's death. Now it was his turn to scowl. "Well? Explain yourself."

"What is there to explain?" Harry shook his head. "You know why I did it. I couldn't remain defenseless against him."

"You should have come to me," he said, voice deep and his eyes dark.

"I did. You were doing your best, but it wasn't enough for my peace of mind. I'm not sorry I did it,
Severus. He was going to kill you!" Harry closed his eyes tight and took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm. When he opened them again, there was finally the sadness to his eyes that Severus wanted to see. "I am sorry that Draco had to do it, though. I never expected him to be the one to trigger the poison."

Severus knew that was as much regret as he was going to get from the boy and let it go for now. To be honest, he understood Harry’s position. The power Dumbledore had over him had been great, should the headmaster choose to use it. As he had chosen the night Harry was taken to the graveyard, refusing Harry the help he needed. Severus, himself, had been trying to kill the headmaster while they dueled. He couldn't exactly reprimand Harry for making the same choice.

"I want to know how you became such close friends with Draco." Severus eyed the teen. Harry offered an innocent smile and he snorted. “But, first, I will continue my story."

"Please do," Harry agreed.

Severus didn't look back at the wall. He needed to see Harry's expression as he detailed the condition Boy was in and the following actions of Demon. Harry stared at him, eyes wide. His mouth parted with surprise when he heard how Demon actually spoke. He was less surprised that he had killed the Dark Lord. When it was over, he closed his eyes and Severus could only see pain on his face.

"Thank you for telling me the truth," Harry whispered.

"I will not lie to you," Severus promised. "I may, at times, withhold information, but I will never lie."

Harry nodded. "I understand that. I don't like it - I want you to be able to tell me everything all the time - but I understand."

"I will keep you informed as often as I can.” Severus reached out and covered Harry's hand with his own. He was fiercely proud when Harry didn't flinch away. "I am telling you everything now."

"What happened after Demon went back In? And why did he do that? Why not stay Out on a rampage?" Harry questioned, tilting his head curiously.

"I wondered that myself." Severus hooked his hair behind his ear and leaned back, crossing his legs thoughtfully. "I spoke to Salazar and we theorize that because Demon was born from Voldemort he felt the Dark Lord's death. The shock of it rendered him unconscious, so to speak."

"And why was he talking? He wasn't that coherent the last time I checked," Harry fretted, biting his lower lip.

"Demon's mind grows and becomes more complex the more he is fed. For a long time, you fed him all your hate and rage from the treatment you received from the Dursleys and from the aggravation you felt your first years at Hogwarts, not to mention the rage Lockhart inspired by assaulting you. Salazar speculates the Dark Lord also fed Demon. The alter stood between you, so to speak, connecting you. As the Dark Lord got stronger and closer to a body, the more he unknowingly fed Demon, making the alter stronger and more aware."

"So now Demon is capable of thought."

Harry shivered as the implications of that trickled into his thoughts. He liked the idea of being able to protect himself, should it come to the worst case scenario. Demon had saved him a couple times, after all, but he hated feeling like he couldn't control himself. Unlike with Boy, Demon was a serious threat to everyone around him. Demon wouldn't hesitate to hurt any of the people Harry cared about.
"We will find a way to guard against him," Severus promised. He knew exactly what Harry feared. In all honesty, he feared it as well. "We do have the Animagus trigger on him, but we will find a way to better secure his door."

"Thanks." Harry forced his shoulders to relax. Tensing up like that pulled on his injuries and it hurt like the blazes. "So… You were going to tell me what happened after Voldemort was dusted?"


They talked for a long time. Only stopping when Remus and Sirius came up to eat dinner with them. Severus watched Harry eat and talk with the others and he felt himself uncoil a bit. He had feared Harry's mind would be more damaged from everything that happened - feared Boy or Demon would bleed through his dominate personality - and was greatly relieved to find it was not so.

Harry was still only Shadow. His mind was still and intact. This had effected him, yes. You could the physical evidence of this in his eyes, which were changed from channeling so much Dark magic, but otherwise he had come from the horrific experienced relatively whole. He felt fierce relief that he hadn't lost the child he had come to love.

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Harry didn't know what to expect from his mentor, but answers to all his questions hadn't been it. He was grateful and humbled by the man's trust in him and in his strength, but he was also grimly anxious about all he had learned. He retreated into himself, freeing his mind from his still severely injured body to think about everything Severus had revealed to him.

Dumbledore was dead and could no longer threaten him. Relief was his immediate response as well as pleasant surprise that Draco had found the strength to activate the poison they had created together. He was so damn thankful that the blond had gotten there in time to save Severus. However, the headmaster's death left a huge hole behind. He knew there was going to be some heavy-duty pushing and shoving as those in power tried to elbow into positions of authority over the most influential school this side of Europe. And that left openings for corruption.

Voldemort was dead, yes, but the majority of his followers weren’t, and they were a problem. Word had to have spread in those circles of Voldemort's demise. Some would want to take his place, some would be after Harry for revenge or just because he was a potential threat to them. Especially since they tortured him. They would fear retribution.

And they should. Harry felt a burning hate for those bastards who had left him so bloody broken. He couldn't sit up on his own! And Severus's descriptions, brief though they were, of his body before Boy and Demon could heal most of the damage… He felt angry, sick, and frightened. Not a nice combination. Mostly, he just wanted to know none of them would ever be able to hurt him again.

Then there was the fact that the Wizarding world thought he was either dead or kidnapped. The minute he showed himself they would make demands. Interviews, stalkers, attackers, beggars, worshipers… No matter which category, the whole of the Wizarding world would be watching him, wanting something from him. It was intolerable. He was willing to defend himself from Voldemort and he was willing to do what he could to protect those around him, but he was not going to be their sacrifice, martyr, or soldier. He belong to no one but himself.

And then there were the more private problems of Demon and Boy, his last two alters. He was aware they were both changed by the events in the graveyard; he could see it when he Occluded and explored his own mind:
The ocean representing his mind had swallowed him as he had sunk deep. Slowly all light had disappeared, the fish and sea-vegetation disappeared and still no doors. It had felt like he was sinking into a bottomless hole in the middle of his ocean floor. Suddenly struck with a deep fear, he had flailed for the surface toward the light. His alters were too deep now, too wild. He had no access to them, no control... It was a very unpleasant realization.

Chewing over all these problems - trying to predict what they meant for the future and weigh all the potential ramifications to himself - Harry settled deep within his Occlumency shields to think. As he did so, he worked to camouflage the deep hole in his mind and set mental boobytraps for anyone who might break in his mind and go looking where they shouldn't. The barriers might even help keep Demon and Boy from rising up out of the darkness.

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Harry opened his eyes and blinked against the bright, late morning sun filling the room. For a wonder, he was alone; the chair residing beside his bed was empty. He sighed in pleasure and just enjoyed the solitude while it lasted.

His bed was just as it always was: the thick down comforter fluffy and warm, the dark blue color complementing the spotless thick black carpet. The light cream-colored walls contrasted with the dark floor, making the room seem bigger. The heavy drapes over the window were even lighter, making them glow with the sunlight they gently held back. The walls were bare but for a single mahogany frame holding a silver ring behind its sparkling glass; the mate of the one he still wore on his right middle finger. He also still wore his silver bracelet, which remained on his left wrist.

Returning his attention to his room, Harry noticed the closet door was cracked open. There was just enough light to see his clothes, school trunk, and the shelves at the back that held his books and photo albums. He smiled, the dull pain constantly thrumming through his body forgotten completely as a wave of happiness washed through him. It would never cease to amaze him that he had a place to call his own, a home at last. This would be his third summer in this house.

The bedroom door opened and Remus and Sirius came in. Harry turned to them and smiled. The two men froze and then Sirius was running over, exclaiming and scolding at the same time. Remus followed more slowly, but his smile spoke volumes. Harry laughed softly, careful not to jar his ribs as Sirius turned into a dog so he could run in a circle, yapping happily.

"You act like I've been out of it for years. It couldn't have been more than a few days." He shook his head.

"Three actually," Remus answered. "But you know what he's like."

Harry grinned. "Yeah; a toddler."

Sirius morphed back into his human form and pouted. "I am not!"

Remus burst into loud laughter and Harry snickered.

"I see you are awake," Severus spoke, coming into the room. He was still limping and Harry suspected that it was a permanent injury. The thought made him instantly angry.

"Will it never heal?" he asked softly, needing to know. Remus and Sirius stood still, waiting for Severus's answer, aware of their charge's seriousness.

Severus inclined his head. "It may."
"But you doubt it," Harry said grimly, hands tight on his blankets.

"I do," he allowed and stepped closer to the bed. "However, I would not change my actions."

"I know." Harry was grateful for the man's support, but it still upset him.

"I wanted to ask you if you had made any decisions concerning your current position." Severus smoothly changed the subject.

Harry lifted his head, his thick hair falling into his unsettling, pale green eyes. His glasses were an asset in this; muting most of the effect of the new altered color. He looked much older than his few years with the serious, knowing cast to his face. He had seen things no one should and still he had survived. It made Severus feel fiercely proud as well as fiercely determined to shield the child from further horror and damage.

"I have actually," Harry admitted. "If I return to the Wizarding world, I will be a target. From people who want me to protect them, from people who see me as a threat, from the remaining Death Eaters. I'll be torn apart. I won't put myself in that position. I'm thinking of leaving the country or just staying at the house for a while. It's not like I can't learn on my own and I'm ahead of my peers in Hogwarts, anyway."

"I suspected you would feel that way." Severus folded his hands before him, keeping them low. His expression was carefully blank. Harry knew his mentor well enough to listen carefully. Whatever his teacher was about to say was very important. "I will follow you, whatever you decide, but I wanted you to be aware there is a third option in addition to relocating and hiding."

Sirius's eyes widened. He knew where this was going. He went rigid next to his friend and had he not been so full of grief and shock he would have howled and screamed his denial. Remus's hand gripped his forearm tightly - whether to support him or to keep him silent, Sirius didn't know. Either way, he couldn't move. He could hardly breathe.

"What?" Harry pushed when Severus just looked at him intensely, his dark eyes watching him carefully.

"The Adoption Ritual," he finally spoke, softly and carefully. "I would be honored if you would consent to be my son in blood and name."

The world faded away. Eyes wide, absolutely shocked, Harry could only stare at the man before him. This man had fought for him, had helped him learn who he was and helped him heal the damage in his mind. This was the first person to celebrate his birthday with him, the person who had given him a home. He was secretive and almost too clever, but he never put himself before Harry's needs. At least, not since the whole Black disaster in Third-year.

Severus even took in Neville, a student he didn't like, all because Harry did. Severus had fought his own mentor for Harry's sake and taken serious injury from the fight he would not have won had it not been for Draco. This was the one who had not fled even Demon, but had remained in the graveyard to rescue Harry. He would have bled to death in minutes had Severus not been there to send him home to Remus and Sirius.

Harry did love the man, but a father? Could he give anyone that much of himself, that much trust? If he could, Severus was the only person alive who deserved it, but still… Part of him flinched away from the idea, saw it as a trap. He already had the home, had the man's protection and care. Why go further and become of his blood, take up his name, legally place himself under his power as his child?
"Think on it. I do not require an answer immediately," Severus spoke, breaking the tense silence. He inclined his head again and left the room as quietly as he entered.

"Harry…" Remus spoke softly, encouraging the teen to open up.

"I need to think…" Harry shook his head once. Then he thought of something and looked up at Sirius who looked about to scream or cry. "Are you alright?"

"I…" Sirius swallowed thickly. "I would adopt you as well. Remus would if it were allowed. We all love you, Harry."

"I know," he said softly, looking down at his hands. Both wrists were bandaged, but otherwise they were uninjured except for some bruising across the back of his hands. "You are both good friends. I care about you, but it is different with Severus. He is…"

"The one who saved you," Remus spoke gently. He reached over and stroked the teen's messy hair once. "We understand, Harry. We will support any decision you make."

Sirius nodded, but it looked mechanical. He stuttered something and stumbled from the room. Harry looked up at Remus calmly. He wasn't very worried. Sirius would either be okay with the offer or he wouldn't. Remus smiled and pat his shoulder before turning and following his friend.

Sighing, Harry leaned back. Alone again but this time he wasn't aware of the room he loved. All his attention was on the decision he was facing.

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The forest that surrounded Draco was ancient. Almost as ancient as his name. They had seen many centuries pass, and, even as a kid, he had felt their strength, had felt insignificant compared to them. Those trees did not care if he were good or bad, right or wrong. More importantly, they did not care he was Heir to the Malfoy name and legacy.

Draco had always come to this balcony whenever he felt the pressure of being Lucius's son. It had always given him a strange comfort to know that not everything in existence scrutinized him. The forest was a blissful escape when the world was too much, but staring at them now he felt cold and afraid. The trees didn't care about human life or human pain. If someone were tied down between their trunks and tortured under their canopy, they wouldn't help. They wouldn't even notice.

Shivering, he gasped and backed away. Draco had no idea why he kept coming here. Every time he hoped something would change, that the sense of peace would return, but instead he felt the cold chill of helplessness and nausea. Dark circles lay under his eyes. His pale skin was clammy and gray, no matter the warmth of the summer morning. The sense of illness hung around him, of weakness.

Coming home from Hogwarts he had known things would be bad. He had been still shaken over Dumbledore's death, could still see it happening in his nightmares, but he had Professor Snape's word that Shadow was safe. He clutched that knowledge to himself and never let it go. Not even when he got home to find his father, pale with blazing eyes, maddened.

Lucius shifted between fearful - hiding in the library and allowing no one near him - to paranoid. Twice Lucius attacked Draco and his mother, accusing them of being enemies in disguise. The beatings had been horrible but not long lasting. Lucius would stop before too long and just stare at them, eyes wide with some awful light. Then he'd leave them and search feverishly through his office. Papers and books and scrolls were littered throughout the Manor.

Narcissa and Draco tiptoed around the house. When called on, they obediently helped Lucius put up
protective wards and tighten the Manor's defenses. Anything to keep away one of his rages. They just had to get through the summer. Once Draco was back at school, Narcissa would leave to visit family. They just had to survive two months. Of course, Draco had learned long ago that nothing that had to do with his father was easy. Four days ago everything had changed…

Draco opened his eyes wide, desperate to see what was physically in front of him, even if it was those awful trees, but it was too late. His thoughts had wandered too close to the bright flame of horror in his mind, and he was sucked back there, back in his father's Pensieve...

He stood there, as if he were a real spectator, in that graveyard. It was as if he were the one bowing down before the disfigured, grotesque being that was the reborn Dark Lord. Red evil eyes and flickering long tongue, the creature was disgusting. Draco heaved but had nothing in his stomach to vomit.

He stood, trapped in memory, held in place by his father's double, as Death Eater Lucius stepped up for his turn on the body of his only and best friend…

Merlin…

…No

The naked body lay twisted at the waist, arms spasming to the right, his legs broken almost in half in three different places; still… so still… so covered in blood and bone chips…

As he watched, the blood slowed, the legs were pulled together by an invisible force, straightened in an obscene parody of their natural state…

All the skin was missing from the body's ribs… They lay in rows, white and glistening with blood in the moon light. They expanded with every tortured breath, sunk in on every scream… The pulpy flesh of lungs pulsed within the fragile cage…

Even as he watched, the blood was slowed and stopped, skin creeping along like moss… a delicate attempt to cover the organs and maintain life…

Draco watched as his Death Eater father laughed… fucking laughed… and twisted his wand… the body's slender arm following the movement, popping loudly at the elbow and wrist… and the screams began again… continued on forever… as more cruel magics broke him further… twisted him beyond recognition… beyond humanity…

Horrifically, the face was untouched… The maddened eyes blazed with terror and pain, with incomprehension and desperation… This face, twisted with agony and drenched with sweat and tears and streaked with blood… this face was that of his best friend… He had sworn to do his best to protect Shadow, and Draco stood there and did nothing as the Death Eaters tortured him… While the Dark Lord watched on with lustful pleasure… While his father stood behind him and clutched at his shoulders, leaving bruises… While his father's mirror pealed more flesh from the broken body of a fourteen-year-old boy.

"Look! Look at him! He's possessed! He was dying! He should be dead! He's some kind of Dark Creature!" Lucius practically shrieked in his ear as Shadow rose from the ground, still missing chunks of his body, still twisted and broken, but shining with power and a horrible starving rage.

Draco was glad then, glad his father was behind him, so that he couldn't see Draco's smile. Eyes wide with shock and horror from witnessing his friend's torture, he wanted to laugh hysterically at the irony that they had merely awoken their own destruction.
"He's not a creature," he shouted over the thunder, screams, and cold delighted laughter. "He's Demon."

"Yes! Yes! He's a demon!" Lucius gibbered.

Then everything went black and they were released from the Pensieve… Draco stared blankly at his father, still vibrating from everything he had seen. He could hardly think straight, knew he was close to passing out.

"We have to protect ourselves from that thing! We have to find a way to destroy it! It'll be coming for us, Draco! We have to stop it," Lucius babbled, eyes bright with manic fever.

Draco had said nothing in return. He had simply turned and walked away. Away from his mad father, away from the Pensieve… He wished it were as easy to walk away from the memories now trapped in his head. Of his friend's suffering, of his father's crimes.

For four days, he had locked himself in his room, refusing to see his mother, refusing to eat or sleep. He was thinking; he was trying not to think. Draco didn't really know for sure which he was doing. He felt lost and he was grieving. He was only fifteen for Merlin's sake. His father was a psychotic murderer, worshiping a monster of a Dark Lord. His best friend was going to be hunted down as some evil creature…

And maybe that didn't even matter. Maybe his best friend no longer existed. How could Shadow survive what they did to him? And even though his father was completely bat-fuck crazy, Lucius still had control of Draco and his mother, still ruled over the Malfoy name and fortune. And… Draco was afraid. Afraid of what his father would do to him and his mother if they were to try and get away. He had watched Lucius torture Muggles last summer, but what he had seen his father take part in at the graveyard went way beyond that.

What was he supposed to do now? The Dark Lord might be alive… His best friend might be dead… and his father had lost it… What was he going to do? What was there to do? What was going to happen to him and his mother? What was Lucius going to demand of them or force them to partake in?

Arms wrapped around himself, he turned to go back into his room when something flashed in the sunlight above the trees. Dawn had come an hour ago. The sun had fully risen while he had been trapped once again in his memories of that damned Pensieve. Draco lifted an arm and shaded his eyes, squinting. An owl? Gasping, he ran…

There! … He could still see it! … A large white owl hovering outside the tightened wards of the Manor: Shadow's owl! He ran into the forest, through the wards, and called for Hedwig.

The gorgeous owl cut silently through the canopy and came gliding down toward him. Draco beamed, his heart rocketing in his chest with hope and excitement. The owl hooted sternly, nipping him on the ear as she settled on his shoulder. She almost couldn't fit, she was so large now.

"Sorry, girl. Were you waiting long?" he asked softly, panting and still grinning.

Hedwig hooted again and lifted her leg where a scroll had been shrunk and tied.

Draco took it gently and removed the charm, returning it to its rightful size. Needing to move, he walked slowly as he read the message:

Dear Serpentine Prince,
My apologies for not writing sooner. I've been recovering from a strenuous contest, but I assure you that all is well. I received your gift, the book on the Greek gods. It will greatly help me in my project. Thank you, Serpentine. Hopefully I can return the favor one day soon. In any case, I'd like to thank you in person. Let me know a convenient time. We can meet at Diagon Alley, maybe shop for school supplies together. I am worried you might not have what you need. Let me know as soon as you can.

Yours truly,

Shadow

Draco blinked tears out of his eyes, grinning like a loon. Shadow was indeed well. Cleverly he had coded the message in case he got Draco in trouble. Between the lines, Shadow expressed concern for him and what was happening with Lucius, as well as thanked him for rescuing Severus, but what really made Draco happy was his friend's request to see him soon. Draco would like nothing better, needed nothing better. He knew it was true by the letter in his hand, but he needed to see Harry with his own eyes before the memories in the Pensieve would stop haunting him.

"Wait here for a minute, Hedwig? I'll be back with your reply shortly."

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Harry ate lunch still in bed. Omi had brought a lap tray and Harry ate from the food given to him carefully. Not only did he have to be careful not to pull on any of his wounds, but his stomach was still uncertain about solid food after weeks of surviving off potions. Remus sat beside the bed, ready to offer assistance if needed. Harry was determined to eat on his own, however.

"Have you thought about Severus' offer?"

"I have," Harry answered, sipping from the soup and pretending not to have noticed Sirius going stiff on the opposite side of the bed as Remus. They sat in silence for several dragging minutes as Harry continued to bring a small sip of soup to his mouth one spoonful at a time.

"Have you decided?" Sirius finally demanded. His blue eyes were bright with anxiety and his hands were clenched at his side.

Harry sighed. "No. I haven’t, but I am leaning toward accepting. As attractive as hiding out here is, I don't really want to leave Neville and my friends. It would be a shame to give up the chance of experiencing Hogwarts without Dumbledore breathing down my back. Still… I'm not sure it will work out. I'll let you know when I decide for sure."

This last was said mostly to Remus. Harry thought it unnecessarily cruel to bring up the subject, especially when he didn't have the answer. Remus met his gaze levelly, obviously disagreeing. Sirius, oblivious to their exchange, stood and left the room without another word. Harry lifted an eyebrow, demanding an explanation.

"He needs to get used to the idea," Remus answered, gesturing toward Harry's food to get him to continue to eat. "He has a tendency to push away things that upset him until he can't any longer. Then he explodes. This way he is forced to face it fairly constantly and releases his displeasure in spurts. Should you choose to accept the adoption, he will have been forced to confront it enough by that point and hopefully won't throw a fit."

"Hmmm," Harry murmured thoughtfully, slurping his soup. "I see your point."

"May I offer you my opinion?" Remus asked carefully.
Harry sighed again but nodded.

"I think you should accept. Not only do I think Severus takes good care of you, he also works well with you. You two make a good team. And, I think most importantly, you are as good for him as he is good for you." Harry smiled a bit at that and Remus continued. "Also, like Sirius, you need to face the things you don't like, not run from them and get hysterical when you can't any longer."

Harry grinned. "I don't know. Hysteria has its good points."

"It may be amusing, but it's not very productive." Remus smiled back. "Now eat your lunch. Omi will be very displeased if you don't finish."

"And how will my doctor feel?" he asked teasingly, looking up through his thick bangs.

"I'm sure your doctor would not be concerned since he merely has to go to the resident Potion Master and requested more Nutrient Potion."

"Evil, you are," Harry exclaimed, pointing his spoon at the man. "Severus would be all over me if you told him I wasn't eating."

"Would he?" Remus asked innocently, his eyes brown eyes sparkling.

Laughing, Harry realized he was outmaneuvered and finished his lunch. He really didn't want to upset Omi and Severus needed rest. His mentor was still a bit worn from everything that had happened. As a reward for being a good patient, Harry was given his magical parchment that connected to Neville's. He had written his brother briefly last night after he had sent off Draco's letter. Neville was at the Herbology Institute at the moment, but he was desperately glad to hear from Harry.

*Hey, brother. You in?*

There was a long pause, but then quick words appeared. *Harry! Hi! I'm at lunch. I can talk for about fifteen more minutes.*

*How is everything? Started any of your own projects yet?*

*No, but I'm learning a TON. I wish you were here. It's all so fascinating!*  

*I'm sure it is.* Harry laughed. Neville always made him feel less freakish. His down-to-earth (no pun intended) personality was always refreshing. *You'll have to tell me about it in more detail when I see you. When will that be, by the way?*

*The program closes on our birthday. I think I can talk Gran into letting me come to the house a week after that. So probably I'll be by August 7th or so and I'll stay until school. If Professor Snape allows it, I mean.*

*Of course! That will be nice.*

*Yeah… How are you, Harry? You said you were fine, but…*

*I am fine,* he interrupted. *I'll tell you more in person. Not now.*

*I understand. If you need me, I can come home sooner. I wanted to be with you from the beginning, but Remus…*

*He was right,* Harry cut in again. *I miss you, but I mostly sleep all day. I'm glad you are at the*
Institute! Wouldn't have gotten you into the program otherwise! Stay. Have fun. I'll be here when you get back.

I just feel disloyal.

Don't! Really, Nev. I'm glad you're there. I need time to take in everything that happened. This is good and I'll see you in a few weeks.

Okay, okay, I get it. Neville wrote, but then he hesitated a second before continuing. Be well, Harry. Write me at night when I have more time to talk. I love you, brother.

Same here. I'll write you before bed.

Talk to you then.

Bye.

Harry put aside the parchment and yawned. He hadn't been joking when he said he slept most of the day. At least he was down to only one nap instead of three. Remus projected he would be able to start taking long walks in a week or so. Harry couldn't wait. The bedside service had only been amusing the first six hours or so.

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It wasn't even dark out when Hedwig came swooping into his room after Remus let her in. Remus raised an eyebrow when he saw the scroll, but he didn't push when Harry didn't answer his unasked questions. Instead, he offered to go start his bath, giving him a few minutes alone.

"Thanks, Remus." Harry smiled at him.

The man smiled back and gently shut his door behind him.

Harry immediately turned his attention to the letter.

Shadow,

I am so thankful to hear from you. I've been worried. There's much to tell you. Things aren't well here. I'll be at Diagon Alley tomorrow. If you can come, meet me at the book store at noon. If not, I'll write you again later in the week with another possible meeting time. Don't write me back.

Yours,

Serpentine

"Damn."

Harry crumpled the letter in his fist and scowled at the wall. Draco was in trouble and Harry couldn't hardly sit up on his own let alone get to Diagon Alley, but he had to do something! Lucius had forced his friend to watch him torture innocent people when he was only thirteen and he put Draco under the Imperio Curse for almost three months when he was fourteen. Harry couldn't imagine what the man was like after the disaster in the graveyard.

"Your bath is ready," Remus said as he entered. He hesitated when he saw the intense look on the teen's face.

"I need to talk to Severus," Harry said grimly. "Alone, please."
Remus nodded and left the room.

Harry sat silently, cursing his body and doubly cursing the Death Eaters. It felt like an eternity before Severus finally came in. "Shut the door please," he said softly.

Severus lifted an eyebrow, but he did as he was asked. He walked silently across the room and sat in the chair that was now always by the bed. Harry waited for him to sit but just barely.

"I need your help once again. It's about Draco."

"What has happened?"

Severus's dark eyes were neutral and his emotions were like a still pool, giving out nothing. He was the only person Harry knew who could become so still and accepting. Everyone else had a constant flow, no matter how small, of emotions escaping them. Only Severus could stop that flow and direct it inward, canceling it out so that he could observe and listen without distraction. It was one of the things Harry admired most about the man, one of the things he was most grateful for, especially since he was such a powerful Empath.

"I can't really explain everything," Harry admitted. "Draco has confided in me and I can't betray that trust, but basically he's in trouble. He's going to be at the bookstore on Diagon tomorrow at noon. He wants me to meet him there so we can talk. I need you to go for me. I want him to come here if he can, if you will allow it?"

"Lucius was one of the ones who hurt you and will, without a doubt, be hunting for you now," Severus pointed out neutrally.

"Draco is not his father. I can't give you details, but we've been conversing for over a year. I trust him. You know I do. His name came out of that damn spell as an equal to Nev." Harry took a deep breath and met his mentor's eyes. "Well? Will you grant him sanctuary?"

Severus didn't say anything at first. They just watched each other. Then the older man sighed and crossed his legs, his hands linking over his knee. "I want you to realize that I spent almost a decade creating this house. I've sacrificed many things to ensure this place is safe from detection. No one can find me here or break in. Only I knew of its existence… Until you… I gladly share my home with you. I opened it to Longbottom, Lupin, and Black. That's three more people who can potentially betray this location, who make this place less safe."

"I do understand that," Harry said softly, lowering his head and fidgeting with his fingers. "I'm as protective of this house as you are, though I know you have no way of knowing that." He fell silent. Sighing, he lay his head back and stared at the ceiling. "You know, growing up, I imagined having my own home, but I… I didn't really picture people in it. When I was younger - I guess until I was about six - I imagined my parents or some other family member rescuing me. That fantasy died when I got to school and saw how loving parents acted around their children. I realized that if anyone were coming, they would have by then. So the fantasy changed to a place of my own with no one else. That was my idea of paradise. It kept me going."

"I was not asking you to justify yourself," Severus said softly into the break in Harry's rambling. "I am not accusing you of being careless with our home."

Harry smiled at the shared possessive. "I know that." He lifted his face and met his mentor's gaze. "Severus… When you first brought me here… It was… Unfathomable. You had no reason to invest your time and energy in me. Yet you did. You took me in and you really cared what happened to
me. Hell, you hid me from Dumbledore and still worked to heal me despite his orders not to. You made peace with enemies for me and you took in another teenager because it would help me cope. You've done a lot."

"I'm not asking you for commendation either," Severus hissed, his openness rippling and shattering with embarrassment and disquiet. His legs uncrossed and he sat stiffly in his seat, obviously deeply uncomfortable.

Harry smiled softly. Remus was right. As much therapy as he still needed, Severus obviously had issues of his own that needed to be worked out. His inability to hear compliments or gratitude wasn't healthy, and Harry suspected the root of that problem was very ugly and painful, something he hoped he could help Severus make some kind of peace with.

"I know you aren't. Just listen," he admonished, making Severus shift some more in his seat. "What I'm trying to say is that of all the things you've given me, this house is the most precious and important. What it symbolizes is what matters most to me. I want to keep it protected as much as you do. If you feel Draco could be a threat - even unintentionally - then I'll have to think of some other way to help him."

"We will think of some other way to help him," Severus corrected. "I did not say I would not be of assistance. I merely wished to express my concern. Draco is Lucius's heir. If we were to hide him here against Lucius's will, we could not stop him from finding his son or this house."

"I see." Harry bit his lip thoughtfully. "Blood magic. Made worse because Draco is tied to a large and prestigious family. It would anchor any finding spell and give it strength."

"And Lucius has no other children. Add to this the fact that Lucius has worked closely with Draco's magic while teaching him from a very young age. It will be almost as familiar as his own," Severus added.

"Right." Harry nodded. "So what can we do?"

"Do you know the specific trouble he is having?" Severus asked carefully, finally relaxing again in his chair. He was certain the unexpected emotional exhibit was finished.

"I'm not sure. He didn't say." Harry uncrumpled the note laying next to him and handed it over. Feeling a bit mischievous as well as nervous, Harry decided to tell the man what he had been trying to say with that unbelievably awkward rant about the house. The timing was perfect since Severus was distracted. "I would be honored to be your son. I agree to the adoption."

Severus jerked in his chair, almost ripping the letter in half.

Harry's eyes went wide, matching his mentor's across from him. He had never seen his teacher so shocked before. Never had Severus been caught so off guard that he was ever this expressive with body or expression, but he sat there now with his mouth hanging slightly open, his face paling further, his whole body went tense, and his hand re-crumpled Draco's letter in his fist.

"Pardon?" Severus finally managed.

"I… ah… I was trying to say so earlier… but… Anyway, I thought about it and I really like the idea," Harry finished strongly. His green eyes were bright under his thick wavy bangs and round black glasses. His expression was solemn, without uncertainty. This was too important to mess up.

"You do not have to say so," Severus said, regaining his footing. "I will help you with Draco in any case."
"I know that." Harry shook his head. "I decided this before Draco's answer came." He sighed and ran his hands through his hair, ignoring the pain the move caused. "Look. There are many reasons why I am agreeing. I don't want to leave Hogwarts yet. I want to go back to school with Nev and Draco. I want to keep an eye on what's happening here, but I don't want to be Harry Potter while doing it. I always hated the fame and expectations being Harry Potter brought me. I am glad to finally be shedding it, but more than that…" He looked over at Severus, meeting his guarded dark eyes. "Severus, I've learned to depend on you. I trust you. You're a part of my life now and I wouldn't have it any other way. No matter what I choose, you're going to be there. Might as well as make it official, right?"

"I… am surprised at your decision. I am aware how much you prize your independence," Severus said carefully. He leaned forward and stared intently at the teen, gauging his reactions and non-reactions. He had to be sure this was what Harry truly wanted.

"I'm still independent," Harry countered, but his eyes narrowed. "You aren't taking that away from me. You will have no more authority in our personal relationship than you do now, correct? You aren't expecting something else?"

"You are correct," Severus reassured. "I merely wish to provide you with a firmer foundation of support and protection."

Harry eyed the man. "Does this mean that you feel obligated to offer adoption? I thought it was because you wanted me as your son as much as you wanted to help me."

Severus flinched back as if he had been struck, his eyes widened again. "Harry… I did not mean to imply… Of course I do not act out of obligation…" he stumbled over his words, his face pale, distress and anxiety rising off him like smoke.

Harry smiled softly. He was on a roll tonight. Making Severus lose his almost unwavering emotional footing twice in so many minutes had to be a record.

Finally, the man cleared his throat and glared semi-menacingly at the smirking teen. "My care for your wellbeing is more personal than a mere wish to help you. When I said I'd be honored to have you as my son, I meant every word."

Harry really did smirk then. Only Severus would come as close as he ever would to saying 'I love you' while glaring at the other person as if they were guilty of something. In any case, he did understand. And he didn't need empathy to know Severus truly cared for him, so he softened his smirk into a smile. "I will be honored to have you as a father, Severus."

Red formed on Severus's cheeks. Humble gratitude as well as happiness twined with embarrassment and poured from the slender form of his mentor. Harry's smile turned into a grin when Severus's thin lips twitched up into a small smile of his own. "The ceremony takes place on the day of your birth. There is a potion you will have to drink. It will alter your DNA so that you will be equally made up of mine, Lily, and James's genetic material."

"So I'll look like a combination of all three of you?" Harry questioned, curious. "I thought I would just have to wear a glamour."

"It is possible that you will not change very much at all. It is also possible you will change greatly and in ways you might not suspect. Genetics is very complicated. You are made up of as many recessive traits as you are dominant traits. Adding my genetics to the mix may cancel out the dominant traits established from the mixing of Lily and James and allow the recessive ones to the surface," Severus explained contentedly, relaxing into his role as teacher.
"I'm not going to turn into a girl, am I?" Harry narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "I know I've had alters that were girls, but I would rather not change sex."

"You will not change gender." Severus did smile then. "The potion and ritual is designed to take my genetic material and use the combination it would produce for a male child, then bind it with the genetic code you already possess."

"In a way..." Harry said slowly, his eyes sparkling playfully. "It's kinda like I'll become our child, were it possible for us to make children."

"That is the most disturbing thing I've ever heard you say," Severus sneered. "But you are correct. When two people mate, they combine their DNA into a single code or a single entity. I am combining my DNA with yours and making a new single entity that will result in your new physical body."

"You keep emphasizing the physical part. Am I to take it you are reassuring me that my personality, mind, and soul will not be altered or touched in any way?" Harry smiled.

"Clever child." Severus nodded. "That is exactly what I'm trying to tell you. If I thought this would affect your mental barriers or bring out Demon or Boy, I would not have suggested it in the first place."

"Good." Harry nodded decisively. "Because neither are coming out ever again if I can help it. Merging is a lost cause. Boy and Demon are too insane and dangerous. I would not come out of a merging sane or functional."

"Unfortunately, I agree. Rehabilitation after such severe abuse and trauma is not feasible. Demon is another matter, however." Severus sighed and rubbed at his forehead. "He did not originate within you. He was born of a dark spell that merged with a small portion of your infant soul, thus you claimed him and power over him. There may be consequences to locking Demon away or merging him with your personality. We need to think carefully before we make decisions pertaining to Demon. He is an unknown variable."

"I guess." Harry wanted to cross his arms, but knew he shouldn't. His chest still hurt. "For now, though..."

"Yes. For now we protect your mind from both your alters," Severus agreed.

They were interrupted from further discussion as Remus knocked on the door and stepped into the room. "The medicines in the bath will expire soon," he said softly.

"We are finished." Severus stood and carefully pulled down the covers and spelled Harry with a levitation charm. He would have carried him in his arms, but that would unnecessarily aggravate the teen's wounds.

Harry sighed, but he didn't fight the charm or complain about his lack of clothes. With all the bandages covering almost every inch of skin, he didn't feel very naked. Besides, clothes would just hurt and chafe. He was so used to the consistent low level of pain, he hardly noticed it anymore, but anything added was like hot sparks of shock along his nerves. It was best to just close his eyes and let them help him. Soon he would be able to walk and take care of himself again. Until then, he had to bear it.

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It had been fifteen days since Draco had met Professor Snape at Diagon Alley. Everything had gone
according to plan. Draco slowly convinced Lucius that it would be best if the family split up, to give
the creature a harder time of tracking them down. Narcissa went to France, Lucius was in London,
and Draco told his father he was hiding somewhere safe with friends in Italy. And because the inside
of Severus's safe house really was in Italy, any tracking spells would reassure Lucius that his heir
was right where he was supposed to be.

However, instead of going to Italy, he had taken three portkey trips (just to make sure he wasn't
being followed) all around England and was finally deposited in this tiny pub with a note informing
him to walk up the dirt lane away from the village. Half exasperated at all the fuss and half glad he
wasn't staying in this flea-pile of a Muggle town, Draco brushed off his white shirt and black slacks
and followed the directions.

The Muggles in the little town shot him curious looks, but Draco ignored them with well-practiced
ease. He was too happy to be out in the open with the sun warming his skin to be irritated. It was
summer and, for once, the shadow of fear haunting his steps was gone. He was free of his house and
father, his mother was safe, and Shadow was waiting for him.

Smiling, Draco quickened his pace, passing the last of the small dilapidated little houses. The dirt
dune wound through tall green summer grass, through skinny trees that made up the woods in the
area. He couldn't see anything ahead; his view blocked by the gentle hills, but that was okay. He was
enjoying his walk. It was a nice change after all the whirling portkey trips.

His smile faltered, however, when a shadow flashed through the brush to his right. He came to a
stop, grey eyes wide, trying to catch any hint of movement. His hand moved carefully to his pocket,
gripping the wand hidden there. Suddenly, he was afraid this had all been a trap. A convoluted test
created by his father. Or maybe Lucius had figured out his deception and had tampered with the last
portkey?

Heart pounding in his ribs, he brushed his hair out of his face and scanned the darkness. The snap of
a twig had him spinning around, wand out and ready. He about swallowed his tongue at what he
found. There, slinking out onto the dirt lane, was a large cat. It was almost thigh high and had a big
angular head with large golden eyes. Its coat was brown and gold, spotted with black. The large
twitching ears on its head had tuffs of hair and, as its whiskers swept back, it revealed inch-long
sharp white teeth.

Swallowing, Draco took a few steps backward. "I don't have anything for you," he warned lowly.
"No food. Stay back if you know what's good for you."

The cat ignored his words and moved gracefully forward, its short tail lashing gently behind it with
every step. Draco tensed and prepared to fire a spell; the beast was only fifteen feet away… ten… He
opened his mouth to shout a blasting curse when suddenly the animal stopped and sat on its
haunches. Draco gasped, surprised.

The cat tilted its head at the sound; its long tongue licking lazily at the top of its lips.

"Good kitty," Draco whispered, backing away more quickly now. "That's right. Stay right there and
I won't have to kill you."

A coughing sound was his only answer and then a low rumbling purr rose in the air between them.
Draco hesitated, growing suspicious as the cat padded forward, still purring. It didn't look aggressive.
It looked completely relaxed. Still, he stood completely motionless and rigid as the large and deadly
animal pressed its cheek to his thigh and rubbed it twice. Another cough sound and the cat passed
and continued up the lane. Draco turned to see it looking over its shoulder.
"Oookaaayy," he drawled. "If you're Professor Snape's pet, I'm going to have a talk with him about House loyalty."

The cat rumbled and flicked its tail playfully before loping forward. Draco shook his head and followed, but he kept his wand out. The woods thinned and soon enough he caught a glimpse of the ramshackle two story house at its end. The cat stopped and waited patiently. Draco walked up beside it and the animal butts its head against his legs again.

"I know," he told it. "The house is probably much better looking inside."

The cat licked his hand and walked forward.

"If its not, I'm going to talk Shadow into coming to a hotel with me in Rome," he muttered.

In minutes, he crossed the wildly unkept lawn and stood at the front door. The cat lounged in the doorway, laying on its side. Draco knelt and bravely stroked its head and behind its ears. The fur was soft. Maybe cats weren't so bad, he mused as he felt the warmth rising from the lean body. Slitted golden eyes watched him and a pink tongue swiped lazily at his wrist. He smiled.

"Thanks for the escort. At least someone here has manners," Standing, he brushed off his clothes once more and turned the knob. His eyes widened at what he found.

A modest greeting chamber that opened into two large rooms to the right and left. A large staircase curved around the back wall and rose up to a hall with an open banister. The rooms were brightly lit and everything looked clean and well-cared for. The cat pushed him forward and he walked the rest of the way through. He was gaping into the blue sitting room, which had comfortable luxurious furniture and a huge fireplace when he heard the front door close behind him and a familiar chuckle. He spun, glaring hotly.

"What do you think of it so far? Better than the outside?" Harry grinned at his friend.

"Why am I surprised?" Draco crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "Of course you're an Animagus!"

Harry ran his hands through his messy black hair, his eyes bright with mirth behind his glasses. "I thought you would like to be greeted. I would have gone as myself, but that is problematic lately. Besides, we've discovered that I don't tire out as quickly when I move about in my animal form."

Draco's sore mood disappeared and he grinned. Stepping forward to clasp the smaller teen's shoulders, he looked intensely into the now pale green eyes. "You look well."

"I'm fine, Serpentine." Harry smiled, but that turned into a worried frown. "Are you alright?"

Draco shrugged and stepped back, giving them both space. "As well as I can be, but I don't want to talk about that yet. Show me about." He waved his hand imperiously and hooked his blond hair behind his ear.

"Yes, my prince." Harry gave a mocking bow and laughed when Draco threw a punch at his shoulder. Harry easily stepped out of range and gestured grandly at the dinning room to the left, across from the sitting room. "This is where we eat most of our meals. Lately I've been forced to eat in bed, but I've been released to use the room again. We will come here for lunch. Our single house elf, Omi, is a charming and talented cook."

"Really?" Draco played along, smiling. He clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed the room with a regal air. "I suppose I will have to put this claim to the test. I'm certain Omi has not had to cook for someone with as refined tastes as I possess. Hopefully, he is prepared for the challenge."
Harry laughed and continued the tour. He kept the blond in sight at all times, carefully observing him. Draco was a bit taller - about five feet seven inches now - and thinner. His naturally pale skin looked grey-ish. Tension made the skin around his mouth and eyes tight, and there were faint shadows under his eyes, but the blond hair was just how he remembered it: chin length, thin and light as a feather. As ominous as these other clues were, Draco moved easily and his laugh was free and unburdened.

Draco was watching Harry just as closely. His friend was thinner and hadn't grown since they last met, still standing at five feet four inches. His olive skin tone was paler than normal, but it didn't look unhealthy. What really caught his attention were the pink healing scars that were scattered around his bare forearms. He knew his friend's T-shirt and jeans hid even more. One in particular looked painfully raw. It was the biggest and ran from Harry's right elbow to the inside of his wrist. Draco wanted to ask if they hurt, but he was uncertain how such questions would be received. He remembered what he had seen in the Pensieve and, considering what had been done to him, Harry looked very well indeed.

"Draco?" Harry looked back at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Draco said softly, fighting the memories. He stood stiffly in the middle of the hall, his fists clenched at his sides. His white blonde hair hung loose and hid his face as he looked to the side.

Harry frowned and walked back to his friend's side. This wasn't the time to push. They were standing in the middle of the hallway and Draco had asked not to discuss upsetting topics. Harry was determined to make Draco's arrival a pleasant memory.

"Gee," he said with mocking gentleness. "I didn't know I intimidated you so much. We don't have to if you don't want."

Draco's head whipped around, grey eyes narrowed into deadly slits. "What are you rambling about now, Potter?"

"I was telling you about the game room. If you don't want to play against me, you don't have to."

Harry smiled sweetly. "I can watch as you play, if you would prefer that."

"You're hardly intimidating, Shadow. I was merely giving you an out so you don't have to embarrass yourself." Draco tossed his head and entered the game room. "Since you're too dense to realize kindness when you see it, I'll just have to give you an example to stride toward."

"Oh, really…" Harry grinned. "I hope you aren't too crushed when you leave this room a bit less confident than when you entered."

Draco looked around at the seven games, feeling impressed. They were all top models and very expensive. Suddenly unsure about which games would be too strenuous to his still recovering friend, he pasted on a bored expression and flicked his fingers at the brunet. "Since I obviously have the advantage of good breeding, why don't you pick which game you feel most comfortable with."

"How about a little test of your marksmanship, Serpentine?" Harry drawled and made his way over to the correct game. "You might even beat Nev's score, since you won't get anywhere near mine."

"We'll see, Shadow… We'll see." Draco cracked his knuckles and lifted the simulator wand.

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Remus and Sirius returned to the house after running a few errands. Severus had left early that morning for a faculty meeting at Hogwarts and Harry had requested to meet Draco alone. Sirius had
refused at first, ranting that having a Malfoy in the house would doom them all, but Harry insisted it was safe. Sirius didn't do paranoid half as well as Severus and the Head of Slytherin had put in a dozen safety measures to ensure Draco didn't willingly or unwillingly betray their location.

Still, the Marauders returned home an hour earlier than they said they would. Sirius's posture was stiff and his eyes were bright. Without waiting, he went in search of his godson and the treacherous little snake. Remus followed quickly after, preparing to intervene if Sirius began to make a fool of himself or upset Harry.

They didn't have to look long. As soon as they ascended the stairs, the sound of laughter could be heard. It was light and carefree. Hearing it, Remus felt tears burn the back of his eyes. It had been so very long since he heard Harry laugh like that and had feared he would never hear it again. It seemed Sirius was just as affected. The ex-convict hesitated in his headlong pace and some of the tension in his shoulders lifted.

Silently, they crept to the game room door and peeked in. Draco and Harry stood at the shooting game. Both boys wore bright smiles, making them look younger than their fifteen years. Both were sweaty and playful insults and shoves punctuated their animated play. It was heartening to watch, but Remus was worried when he noticed Harry's flushed cheeks and slightly trembling hands. The teen was far from completely healed and he needed to take it easy.

The teens turned to look at him as he cleared his throat and he offered a smile. "Hello, boys. It's about time for lunch. Why don't you wash up?"

"Remus, Sirius." Harry smiled and gestured to Draco. "This is my friend, Draco Malfoy. Draco, you've met Remus Lupin. He's currently acting as my doctor. This is Sirius Black. My godfather. They stay here with Severus and me."

"A pleasure to meet you." Draco bowed slightly. The smile was gone from his pale angular face but not his eyes.

"Who was winning?" Sirius asked with a grin. He still had reservations about the blond, but he wasn't going to ruin his godson's happiness with his suspicions. He'd just have to settle for keeping an eye on Malfoy.

"Shadow has better aim, but I hit more targets." Draco brushed his hair from his face with a haughty sniff.

Harry laughed and shoved at his friend. "Come on, I'm hungry. You can boast about your perfection later." With that, he turned into his lynx form and loped from the room.

"Show off," Draco sneered, but he followed obediently. He didn't want to get lost, after all. That would be highly embarrassing. Plus, the way Black kept staring at him was slightly unnerving, though he'd never admit it.

Once the teens were gone, Remus turned to look at his long-time friend. "Harry doesn't trust easily. Draco wouldn't be here if he were going to betray him."

"All the more reason to make sure Malfoy doesn't hurt him," Sirius insisted stubbornly. "Harry would never trust anyone ever again."

Remus sighed as Sirius gave him his pleading blue gaze. It was always so hard to say no to that sincere look. "You run the risk of Harry's anger, Siri. He won't appreciate you breathing down Draco's neck."
Sirius grinned his famous grin, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Then we'll just have to be subtle about it."

Remus shook his head. The man was incorrigible. Sirius was worse than the teenagers he had taught at Hogwarts… Well, excepting the Weasley twins. Those two were cut from the same cloth Sirius was and still it took two of them to match Padfoot.

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After a lunch filled with casual conversation, Harry led Draco up to the guest room that was usually Neville's when he was there. The house only had four bedrooms. Sirius and Remus were sharing the fourth. Draco's two trunks – one filled with school supplies, the other with clothes – were sitting at the end of the large bed. The room was almost identical to Harry's own; except the carpet was a dark green and the walls were pristine white. The comforter on the bed was a dark velvety purple and filled with down.

Draco looked around and smirked, "Very nice."

"I'm glad you approve." Harry laughed. "Why don't you get unpacked and settled in. I've been ordered to take an hour nap."

Draco regarded his friend thoughtfully. He did look tired. "I'm sure I can amuse myself that long."

Harry didn't doubt that, but he felt a little uneasy leaving Draco alone with Sirius and Remus just downstairs. He was well aware of Sirius's dislike and didn't want anything to happen. Still, he couldn't keep the two separated all month, so he left Draco and returned to his room. With a swish of his wand, he set an alarm and crawled into bed. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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"So how long did it take you to learn the Animagus Transfiguration?" Draco asked. He was sitting at the mahogany table in the library, leaning over a book on that very subject. A single thin finger ran along the page as he read.

Harry stood to the right of him, leaning against a bookshelf, as he studied the blond's profile. He remembered the many hours at night he had spent in here as Silas. It was probably his favorite room even now. The only difference was that he wouldn't have appreciated company then, but he was rather content with Draco sharing the space with him now.

"Shadow?" Draco frowned, looking over.

"About a year," Harry answered, shaking his head. He came over and took the seat next to Draco.

"Will you help me?" Draco was already looking back at the book, his finger moving again.

"Of course." Harry shrugged and leaned back in the chair.

They sat silently for long minutes, Draco reading and Harry staring at the ceiling thoughtfully. He was thinking of the times he worked beside the blond on the basilisk just as quietly, just as comfortably. Of course, thoughts of the basilisk led to thoughts of the poison they had created and from there to thoughts of Dumbledore.

"I'm glad you could come so early," Harry spoke up, lowering his head to meet the gray eyes now focused on him. "Tomorrow night is my birthday. I'm going to go through the Adoption Ritual. You'll get to witness it."
"Who?" Draco quirked an eyebrow.

"Severus." Harry shifted his gaze to the book in front of his friend. "You saved his life, Draco. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have this chance."

Draco lifted his arm and bumped Harry's shoulder. "It had to be done. I'm just glad we were prepared."

Harry lifted his eyes. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. Draco could read his gratitude and sorrow clearly. The blond gave a small smile and nodded, assuring his friend he was okay with what had happened. Harry nodded back, silently promising that he would be there if Draco needed him. He could never pay Draco back for what he had done, for the damage it had to have caused, but he would try.

"So what animal do you think I am?" Draco asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"Probably a toad," Harry drawled seriously; only to fall laughing a second later as the Slytherin shoved him from his chair.

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Eleven thirty the next night everyone gathered in the sitting room. In less than an hour, Harry was going to turn fifteen and the adoption ritual would be complete. Harry spent most of the day resting in preparation and was now filled with nervous excitement. The air was thick with tension and building power.

Sirius, Remus, and Draco stood at the far side of the room. They were silent and solemn. The adoption of a child into a family is a time of celebration, but there were risks involved for both participants; especially since Harry was so old. Usually only babies and young children were adopted in this manner.

The sitting room looked much bigger when all the furniture was removed from it. The fireplace was blazing and cast the only light in the room. The curtains were drawn tightly across the windows, but even if they weren't the quarter moon was covered by thick clouds. In the center of the room, a circle almost seven feet wide had been drawn with soil that had been sprinkled with rainwater. The door to the room was barred with powerful magic.

Severus stood naked in the center of the circle with an equally naked Harry. His body was covered in raw, pink scars, but they looked much better than a week ago or even a day ago. Both of them were unaware of the spectators in the room. Their full attention was on each other. Harry had natural Empathy, but the ritual would grant Severus the same ability. They stood facing each other, getting to know the complexities of each other's personalities and weighing the sincerity behind the wish for adoption. They were stripped down to their bare essentials.

After almost thirty minutes of silent study, both nodded. Neither stepped out of the circle to cancel the adoption. Severus walked to the center of the circle and picked up the large dagger there. Chanting in Latin and Greek, he began the familial binding. Harry took one slow step toward him at a time, demonstrating trust and free will. Had he been a baby, one of the witnesses would have levitated him. The baby's magic would cancel the simple charm had the child been at all distressed at the move toward the knife-wielder in the center.

Severus stood tall and straight. His lean body pale but strong. Freshly washed, ink black hair hung straight to his shoulders. Thin eyebrows arched over deep set, dark black eyes that watched his son's face for any sign of reluctance. He found none. Thin lips twitched up in a small smile before his hand
brought the dagger to his chest, where he cut the length of his sternum as he continued to chant.

"Ομολογία. Vinculum nos una; μαζί αρχή. Planto nostrum orsa ut unus; πατέρας ἐσος μια. Trado ut
abbas quod filius, planto nostrum αφαιρέσω compositus; οικογένεια γιος."

Harry's eyes, uncovered by his glasses, went wide, but he didn't move to interrupt. He knew what
the ritual entailed; he wasn't surprised. Still, it was hard to watch Severus bleed before him and do
nothing.

The blood welled on Severus's chest before slowly rising up as if unaffected by gravity. It splattered
on Harry's neck, and the teen couldn't help flinching. The blood moved as if it were a thick stream,
coating Harry's skin completely. He was covered from the waist up when Severus sunk to his knees.
Harry began to tremble with the effort of remaining still. Had he been a baby, he would need very
little blood to be covered. He prayed Severus's calculations were correct and the man wouldn't bleed
to death before this was over.

Severus was swaying by the time the last inch of Harry's skin was coated, but he refused to fall. The
wound on his chest sealed shut magically, and he sat there pale and covered in a cold sweat as he
waited for Harry to become his in blood and name.

Harry felt the change come almost instantly. He shivered and squeezed his eyes shut as his skin
shifted and his body changed - Severus's blood absorbed into him, became a part of him. It didn't
hurt exactly, but it wasn't pleasant either. He focused desperately on outside stimuli, trying to distract
himself from what was happening to his body. He could hear the fire crackling, could even hear the
quick anxious breathing of Sirius. He could smell blood and sweat, but also a hint of the sage that
was burning in the hearth.

He was so intent on ignoring his body that he gasped with surprise when he suddenly collapsed.
Severus grabbed him, keeping him in the circle, but he quickly released him again. Eyes open, Harry
arched, crying out softly. The room was spinning; was he melting? Slamming his eyes closed, he
fought not to get sick. He was changing at a genetic level, his whole body was becoming something
different. He opened his mouth, panic slamming into his system as the primal instinct to escape
rocked a scream from deep in his chest.

Suddenly, he was disconnected from his body. He was completely unaware of it convulsing, of the
sound of his bones grating and shifting shape underneath his skin. He couldn't feel anything; not
even his slow rough breathing. It was as if he were floating or heavily drugged. Nothing mattered.
He was safe and at peace. He was home. He was held by Severus's calm voice telling him to be
calm, that it was almost over. He let himself drift for time on end.

And just as quickly he was back. His chest and hips ached horribly. He had the sudden feeling that
his arms and legs were too long. He knew with certainty that if he tried to walk, he'd only fall over.
Biting his lip, he opened his eyes. Severus was leaning over him, his dark eyes practically radiating
worry, but then the man gasped with something like shock.

"What?" Harry croaked, his voice slightly deeper.

"Your eyes…" Severus whispered. His hand came up and gently turned his son's chin so he could see better. "They are like my mother's."

"What… does that… mean?"

Not getting an answer, he painfully sat up. Severus was quick to brace him. Harry took the robe
Sirius handed him. Severus had already pulled on the one Remus provided. Harry was just tying the
sash when he noticed everyone was staring at him. He looked up at Draco and shivered at the intense look in the blond's stormy eyes.

"Omi?"

There was a loud pop and the tearful and exuberant elf appeared next to him.

"Can you bring me a large mirror?" Harry asked quickly, hoping to head off the tumble of words he could tell Omi wanted to spill.

"Yes, Master sir." Omi bowed deeply before disappearing.

He sat, just catching his breath for a minute, until the elf returned. His body was aching horribly, like a toothache but worse. Remus offered him a pain soothing potion, but Harry shook his head. He knew he'd fall asleep as soon as he took anything and he wanted to see himself first. That was when Omi returned with the mirror. Severus held it up with his normal blank expression. It was Harry's turn to stare stupidly.

He looked completely different, but at the same time… He could recognize himself. His nose was the same, long and straight – not too big, not too small. So was his mouth, lips even and full – not thin and long like Severus’s - but his chin was pointier and his eyebrows were now thinner and gently arched. His hair was still black, but now it fell in curls. He remembered seeing a picture of his mother's mother at the Dursley’s. She’d had curly hair just like this, but it had been red like his mother's. He was glad his hair was still black. His new curls spilled over his forehead and over his ears, he looked younger now; maybe thirteen. Then again, considering his slightly deeper voice and the fact he was a little taller, maybe he could be a believable fifteen.

But it was his eyes that made him really stare. They were two different colors! One was still the lighter, more intense green. The other was blue; the pale kind of blue. He lifted his hand, watching his reflection do the same, and touched just under his blue eye.

"Your mother had eyes like this?" he demanded, looking over his reflection's shoulder to stare at his new father.

"She did.” Severus tipped his head forward once in a brief nod. "Blue and green, just like that, but not quite as… vibrant."

"And Lily said she had an uncle with eyes like that; one blue, one brown. She always loved the idea. Thought it was so beautiful. She had hoped her children would have the same eyes," Remus spoke up softly.

"Looks like no matter who my parents are I'm going to look like a freak. First a horrible scar on my forehead…” Which hadn't changed at all; neither did any of his other ones gained by the torture he had endured in the graveyard…” and now multi-colored eyes!"

He turned his attention to the rest of his body, not quite ready to accept his new freakish feature. A quick spell revealed he was taller by two inches. He was just Draco's height now. But his hips and pelvis were smaller and his shoulders were less broad. His skin was pale, like Severus’s and Lily’s. Gone was James's nice olive skin. In fact, the only thing left of James was his nose, mouth, and shape of the forehead. Well, his hair was still messy. Maybe that was the same, too.

With a sigh, he turned to face the others in the room. "Well, who am I, Severus?"

It was tradition and the close of the ritual for the new father to re-name the child. Harry was a new person now. In more ways than one. For the first time since he was five, Harry was relatively whole;
his personality almost completely integrated. Demon contained his pent up rage, but the alter wasn't born from him. Boy was the only piece of himself lost, but... There was just no way to heal Boy at this time. He was facing the world as a new person inside and out. It was only natural to take up a new name as well. Harry Potter certainly didn't fit anymore. It was too limiting and carried too much baggage that he was ready to set down.

"You are my son," Severus answered evenly – as if he had been saying it all his life. "You are Shadow Harold Lilium Snape."

Shadow relaxed his shoulders. He hadn't known what Severus was going to name him and was very glad to be keeping a name he felt comfortable with. But still... "Don't you think its risky for my middle names to be so connected to Harry's life?"

"Tell me, of all your classmates, how many of their middle names do you know?" Severus drawled with a satisfied quirk of his eyebrow.

"Neville Augustus Longbottom and Draco Lucian Narcissus Malfoy," Shadow conceded. "So not many."

"You are not a freak, Shadow," Draco suddenly spoke. His eyes hadn't left his friend once this whole time. "You never were. I think you are beautiful. You are an asset to the Wizarding world."

"I agree completely," Sirius chimed in tearfully and he moved forward to wrap Shadow into a hug. "You are unique. That is nothing to be ashamed of!"

Shadow sighed again, staring at his new face. It was already feeling like his own, but his eyes... He sighed again and lay back down carefully. Pain flared in all his joints and he gestured weakly at Remus. The werewolf knelt and began cascading the youth with a soothing chant that had him sinking into a deep sleep, free of pain.

"Were his injuries aggravated?" Severus asked, pulling his robe tighter. His dark eyes shown brightly, but the emotion in them was hard to weigh.

Remus wondered if it was pride. Worry? Trepidation? He shook his head once, amused at himself. Severus was never trepidatious. He faced his problems with a deadly determination to make them disappear. Shaking off his thoughts, he focused on his patient. "His scars are strained, but none have torn open. His bones are strong, but his joins and ligaments are all swollen and strained. I'll ease the pain and help encourage healing. Sleep is actually the best thing for him."

"I can help carry him to his bed," Sirius offered, knowing magic cast on Harry... No, Shadow... could possibly disrupt the magical healing still going on in his godson's body.

Severus sneered at the man, ready to reject him out of hand. He could carry his own son without help, but Draco caught his eye. There was no expression on his face and he didn't make any subtle gesture, but Severus could read his intent easily. It was a Slytherin way of communicating and he paused to reevaluate the ex-convict.

Black was thin. Better than when he had first escaped Azkaban, but... He was still not completely within a healthy weight range. His black hair was thinning, still wavy as it had been when he was a teen. It fell just past his narrow shoulders now, but it was his face that really made him reconsider. The man had the most... unusual expression.

His eyes were bright with tears, his face pale. He looked like he was grieving as he stared down at Shadow, but his body language spoke of no aggression. Severus could see clearly the man had given
up parental claim over the teen. Severus knew how hard that must have been to the man who had made Shadow the symbol of his sanity in a place worse than hell.

"Very well." Severus inclined his head. He didn't respect Black any more than he had before this night, but he could grant the man some reassurance. He wanted the man to stay accepting. No need to provoke him back into irrationality where Shadow was concerned.

Sirius looked up at his old enemy with surprise. He had known the answer would be a rejection before he had even asked, but he had spent a lifetime speaking before thinking. Therefore, it took him almost a whole minute and for Severus to lift an eyebrow with cold derision before he realized he had been given what he had asked for.

Remus put a supportive hand on his best-friend's shoulder. Sirius's throat tightened, but he bent down and carefully maneuvered the teen into his arms. A gentle spell from Remus insured the teen wouldn't wake. Carefully, silently, they all filed out of the dark sitting room and into the well lit hallway. They didn't speak as they ascended the stairs. As they approached Shadow's room, Draco did pause.

"It's late. I think I'll retire. Good night," he said.

Severus turned to look at him. "Thank you for witnessing this event."

The blond lowered his head in respect. "The match is a good one. I wish you both prosperity and wellbeing in the future."

"Good night, Draco," Severus answered softly, pleased and proud.

The teen turned without another word and entered his guest room.

Severus stood in the hallway for a moment more. He pulled the black silk robe closer around his body. He could feel the thin scar over his chest where he had made the cut. His limbs still trembled faintly, though the potion he had consumed after the ritual had helped greatly. It was done. Shadow was his in blood and name. He had a son.

He went to his child's door and peered inside. Remus's wand was involved in a graceful dance above Shadow's sleeping body. Sirius stood nearby, just watching. Satisfied Shadow was safe for now, Severus strode down the hall to his own chamber.

Chapter end.
The Pain of Others

Harry woke abruptly. He wasn't panicked, but there was no fading up from sleep, either. One minute his eyes were closed, the next he was staring at his ceiling. The curtains on his window were cracked and he could see the night sky. He doubted it was the same night as the ritual and hoped not too many days had passed since his birthday.

"Shadow Harold Lilium Snape," he said softly. His voice was nice. It sounded warmer, smoother. Maybe he could sing now. Before he couldn't carry a tune to save his life.

Smiling at his inane thoughts, he lifted the covers and stared down at himself. He had feared it would feel like he was in someone else's skin, but it wasn't like that at all. He felt new, reborn, but there was no instinctual doubt as to whose body he was in. This was who he was and it felt right. Maybe more right than his old body.

As he began to get dressed, a quick wave of his hand had the date and time appearing before him: Tuesday, July 31st, 1995; 10:43pm. So he only slept through one day. That was good. He was tired of spending most of his life unconscious. He had a sudden urge to play piano, so he made his way to the music room.

Absently, he noticed that his hands were the same - still long and sensitive; good for piano and potions. They were from his mother. His curly hair was also from Lily's bloodline, and it was strange to feel his new curls bouncing and moving with his every step. He was just trying to figure out a way to watch himself walk and move - a mirror just wasn't good enough - when he opened the door to the music room.

It was late, so he had expected the room to be empty, but Draco was sitting at the window seat. His hair was stringy and wet; he must have just come from a bath. He wore black cotton pajama pants and a short-sleeved silk shirt. The blond was obviously deep in thought, not turning around until Shadow cleared his throat lightly.

He gave a small smile in greeting. "Am I intruding?"

Draco's heart froze in fear for a split second before he flushed with embarrassment. "Not at all," he answered hurriedly, standing and trying to regain his composure. It was harder than you'd imagine with the way Shadow's two-colored eyes stood out brightly in the dim light of the room. "I have to admit. For half a second, I didn't recognize you."

"I suppose we'll all have to get used to it," Shadow answered casually. He stepped forward, shutting the door behind him.

Draco watched as the taller, lankier teen made his way to the center of the room. Shadow took off his necklace and, with a murmured incantation, a grand piano suddenly filled the empty space. A rush of anticipation shot through the Slytherin. Was Shadow going to play? Draco remembered the brief bit of music he had overheard at the end of the school year in the infirmary. He'd love another chance to hear some more.

"I just wanted to play for a bit." Shadow sat at the bench and lifted an eyebrow in question.

The expression was very Snape-like and Draco smiled, "You're not too bad. I suppose I can stand it
Shadow flashed a grin before he turned to the keys and softly began to run through some warm-up scales. Draco wondered how the teen could look so elegant and balanced in a pair of muggle jeans and a plain cotton T-shirt. He wasn't even wearing shoes or slippers! But there was nothing plebeian about the way Shadow moved or looked. No one would doubt the sense of power and grace that Shadow naturally exuded. Draco had no idea where his friend had learned to hold himself like that. He hadn't grown up in a Pureblood family and wasn't taught manners and poise from the cradle as Draco had. Plus, Shadow was in a new body! Yet he still moved like the feline Animagus he was.

"Doesn't it feel awkward?"

"I thought it would," Shadow admitted, effortlessly turning scales into a beautiful melody. "But I actually don't feel much different. Except for the new inches, that's harder to ignore, but the unfamiliarity is already fading. I doubt I'll even notice in a few days."

"You're my height now,.." Draco sighed wistfully and sat next to his friend. "I enjoyed having you look up to me."

"Oh, I still do, my prince," Shadow answered with mock sincerity.

Draco laughed.

They sat in silence for awhile after that, both of them greatly enjoying the music. Draco was fascinated with watching his friend. It was so strange, but Shadow was right. The awkwardness was already fading. Soon even Draco would think Shadow always looked as he did now: head slightly bowed, curls messily spilling around his head in an attractive manner, hands working with a steady rhythm and great dexterity as they filled the night with song.

"I think my father's gone mad."

Draco startled himself with the statement. He hadn't consciously decided to speak, let alone about his summer, but when Shadow merely slowed the melody in reaction, not even turning to look at him, Draco felt safe enough to continue. He was shocked by his own desire to share what had happened to him, but it was undeniable now.

"He wouldn't speak to my mother or me, but sometimes he'd fly into rages of paranoia, suspecting us of betrayal…" Draco paused, letting the music distance him from his story.

Closing his eyes and surrounding himself in comforting darkness, he thought of the time they sat in a dark classroom spilling their darkest secrets. Words came to him as easily as they had then. “He'd hit us, but it was the fact that he lashed out physically that terrified us. Lucius is a man who's first instinct is to go for his wand… For him not to… It was like we lived with a wild animal. He was completely unpredictable.”

Draco opened his eyes to see that Shadow was watching his face while he still played. The brunet didn't turn away as he made eye contact, and Draco shivered, turning his head forward, looking blindly ahead. It wasn't the color of Shadow's eyes that made him look away; it was the understanding in them. He knew his friend was seeing him through his empathy, and it was disturbing to know Shadow could feel his grief and hurt as if it were his own.

Clearing his voice, he continued, "Mother and I were confident we could survive until the school year, but then… Lucius brought me to the library where he was doing intensive research into warding, shielding, and dark magic… It wasn't to show me books. He had a Pensieve. He forced me
to enter… It contained his memories of the night in the graveyard."

The piano sung a final note, which slowly faded away. Shadow's hands were rigid and still, his face bone-white and hard. When he spoke, it was with tight control. "I don't know what happened there. I can't remember, but… I can feel it. This deep terror… this howling insanity… sitting inside me. And sometimes… Sometimes my scars burn. All of them, for no physical reason… I'm afraid to remember what happened that night. I'm more afraid of it than anything else."

Draco also felt the weight of the horror of that night. Flashes of what he had witnessed tormented him. Sitting here now, staring into Shadow's eyes as they both felt that looming darkness, Draco realized that they alone shared the whole secret of the graveyard. It was the most intimate thing Draco had ever experienced.

Shadow faced forward and wrapped his arms tightly around his waist. Draco copied the move, but leaned toward his friend so their shoulders pressed against each other, silently telling him he wasn't alone.

Shadow tensed for a moment, but then he allowed himself to lean some of his weight on the blond in acceptance. "I'll never be the victim again, Serpentine… Never again."

Draco nodded firmly, promising to help make that vow a reality.

Clearing his throat, Shadow asked carefully, "What happened… after…"

"My father's was certain you were some kind of demon." Draco quirked an ironic smile at that, which made Shadow chuckle. "He was setting up safeguards so you couldn't get to him. He wanted my help, but… I wasn't good for much of anything after seeing what he'd… done to you. I couldn't look at myself, let alone him."

Shadow began to play again and the tension slowly leaked out of their shoulders. "How did you get him to agree to let you leave the Manor?"

"It's not hard to manipulate a man so afraid." Draco's smile turned bitter. "Paranoia really gives you a lot to work with."

"I'm sorry," Shadow offered.

Draco shrugged. "It's in the past. Lucius won't survive as he is much longer. Another Death Eater will take him out, or Severus will. I fear Lucius no longer."

Shadow stopped playing to face him again. "Why would Severus kill him?"

"He's a threat." Draco raised an eyebrow, silently asking if Shadow had lost his touch. "He's dead-set on finding you and killing you before you can kill him. As soon as he feels he has enough magical armor, he'll come after you. Probably once school starts, if he's still alive. Severus won't put up with that kind of thing. You are his son now."

"But Lucius won't recognize me," Shadow pointed out, smiling as if this were a game he enjoyed immensely.

"Doesn't matter," Draco answered. "He's still a threat."

"Then we'll have to do something about that." Shadow returned to his playing, but this time he started a more lively tune.
Draco laughed. "You're not happy until you're plotting against someone, are you?"

"Of course." Shadow winked a clear blue eye. "I wouldn't be Slytherin otherwise."

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Shadow had to pause and take a deep breath to keep embarrassing tears from rising to the surface. It was midnight, making it officially August 1st, but there stood Severus, waiting in the sitting room with a small birthday cake and a few gifts. It was tradition for them to meet alone the night of his birthday, but last night they had been busy with the ritual. Shadow hadn't been sure Severus would come since it was one day late, but there he stood, dependable as always.

Flashes of all his previous birthdays sped through Shadow’s mind, reminding him of the hurt, despair, and dark bitterness that usually surrounded this day, but then he was remembering his thirteenth birthday. It was the first time he had celebrated the day of his birth and was actually grateful he had been born. It was in this very room with the man standing before him.

"How are you feeling?" Severus asked, watching his son carefully for any signs of illness.

Shadow nodded in answer, unable to speak around the lump in his throat. His eyes were still burning. The streamers in the room were no longer red and gold. Instead, they were purple and white, colors carefully divorced from any association to Hogwarts. He was no longer Harry Potter, no longer a Gryffindor.

"I wasn't sure you would come," he spoke carefully, finally coming the rest of the way into the room.

"I believe you said that last year, as well." Severus smirked and sat in the chair by the fireplace. "We should work on your judgment skills."

"I believe we should," Shadow agreed with a laugh. He gestured at the table with the cake and presents. "Are those for me or Harry?" He laughed again. "I sound like I did when I still had a ton of alters in my head, don't I? At least this time I know 'Harry' won't answer me back."

"It did take some getting used to, you speaking in third person," Severus agreed. "And I believe it is a mix. The gifts from those in this house are addressed to Shadow, but your little group of ruffians addressed their gifts to Harry."

Shadow nodded and ran his hands over the brightly wrapped gifts. It still seemed absurd to get things on his birthday.

"You..." Severus cut himself off and looked away toward the fire, sharp embarrassment warred with affection in his aurora.

Shadow smiled. "What were you going to say?"

Severus said nothing, still looking away. The embarrassment was beginning to dominate. It wasn't like Shadow to pry into the emotions of others, but he felt reckless and dizzy.

"Come on, Severus. You're being too sensitive," Shadow coaxed. "Tell me. I felt the affection behind whatever you were going to say. I'd like to hear it."

His mentor looked over and met the his gaze. The light cast by the fireplace made only Severus’s nose and mouth visible inside the curtain of his lanky black hair. Grief and longing as well as a return of the affection Shadow had sensed wrapped around them man like a frayed blanket. The giddiness infecting Shadow dissolved. Something serious was about to be said.
"I look at you and…" Severus lowered his face, throwing it completely in shadow. "I think you are beautiful. I am incredibly proud to have you as my son… I never thought that I would have this chance again."

"Again?" Shadow questioned softly.

Severus shook his head, still hiding. "I do not wish to spoil your birthday."

"It's impossible to ruin it. It's already over," he pointed out, determined now to know of his father's past. With chagrin he realized he knew very little of this man. "Please… Continue…"

Pain flared and enveloped Severus. He had for so long forbidden himself to think, let alone speak, of this subject and it hurt so very much. "Her name was Amalia. It was a few weeks after the war ended. I was… devastated. All the acts I had performed willingly haunted me. All the acts I committed even when I realized it was wrong, just to protect my place as spy to help Dumbledore… They tore me apart. I was unwell. Hardly ever sober, hardly ever at rest. I still had to face criminal trials and my fellow Death Eaters… I was ready to kill myself.

"Amalia worked for the ministry. She was a Law Wizard and she supported my case. It was through her meticulous efforts and Dumbledore's influence that I didn't end up in Azkaban for longer than the few months I was incarcerated there. I often called her insane because she never left me alone, even when her responsibility was finished. She would answer that it wasn't mad to care for someone.

"Within two months, I proposed to her and she resigned from her job. I had been building this house in secret from the moment I crawled to Dumbledore. I knew I might need a place to hide. I was terrified when I started creating this place. It wasn't until I married Amalia that this house seemed at all pleasant. We finished it together. It took about seven months. When we weren't working here, we were traveling around the world. I was learning to be human again and she was exploring cultures she never had a chance to touch before.

"I started working at Hogwarts almost a month after we finished the house. The second weekend of the start of school, I flooed over as was customary and she told me she was pregnant." Severus stood and began to pace. His voice was rough and choked. It was agony to speak of his Amy. "I returned home as much as I could as she prepared for the child. Summer arrived and I never left her side. We finished both the nursery and the game room. I was… I had never known happiness until her."

"What happened to them?" Shadow asked, tears finally spilling as Severus's pain clawed into his own chest.

"The baby was born… Tabitha was born… June 5th." Raising his hands to his face, Severus tried to breathe evenly. It took several minutes to compose himself. "I was so enthralled, but… I was also afraid. I still doubted my worth. I knew I did not deserve them… I continued to work for the school and to come home every weekend… Tabitha grew so fast. Amalia was so happy."

Severus shuddered and the pain in his voice turned cold and sharp. "But that was all taken away in September. Death Eaters got word of my family, and on the 15th, when Amalia took Tabitha to Diagon Alley for a Halloween costume, they attacked and killed them…" Old fury roared around him. The grief hadn't lessened, even after all this time. "Tabitha was only five months old…"

"I'm so sorry, Severus…" Shadow whispered, covering his own face. Why did those evil bastards exist? Why couldn't they let people live in peace? Two hands settled on his shoulders and he looked up with a gasp of surprise.

"My intention was not to lay my burden on your shoulders. It is in the past," Severus said softly. His
emotions were gone and in their place was the open pool that had been such a comfort to Shadow in the past. "I am honored to have a second chance as a father. Thank you, Shadow."

Shadow pulled away gently and went to the presents and cake. They both needed space from the violent emotions they had evoked. He hesitated over the cake. He knew he was supposed to make a wish, but he had no idea what to wish for. He already had so much more than he ever thought he would... God... Did he really have a father now? It was a terrifying and joyful thought. He blew out the little flames and offered a smile, his own eyes dry again.

"Why don't we have some of this? I'm dying to know what the twins got me."

"Very well." Severus sighed, making Shadow grin.

"Is it a good idea to accept Harry Potter's gifts?" Shadow asked thoughtfully, turning Hermione's gift in his hands. "He's supposed to be missing, remember?"

"Yes." Severus smiled with mischievous pleasure. "That is why I have commandeered the birds that have delivered them. I'll release them in a few months' time. Your cohorts will think nothing of their missing gifts. After all, it was a long and arduous search; they wouldn't blame the birds for misplacing their packages."

"Nice." Shadow grinned. He put her present back on the table. "I think I'll open them later. I'm more interested in the cake."

Severus cut a piece for his son, his lips twitching with dry amusement. "It's no wonder. You haven't eaten in almost thirty hours."

"That long?" Shadow hummed thoughtfully. "You better give me two pieces then."

After cake and quiet conversation about Omi and Sirius's latest antics, they sat down for a game of chess. It had been a while and both of them relaxed as they returned to something safe and familiar. Shadow was determined to get the better of the man and Severus continued to teach as he defeated the teen with seeming ease.

It was good to finally be home.

xXxXxXx

Neville made his way quickly up to the house. A week after they had been sent home from the school, he had gone to the Herbology Institute. He kept in touch with Remus, needing daily reports on his brother, but it wasn't the same. He knew Harry was the one who got him the position in the summer program and that Harry was still too sick to really have visitors, but he felt he should have been here.

Not even talking to Harry every night had made the guilt go away completely. The new cuts on his forearms itched and he nervously tugged on his sleeves. It had been a relief to release some of the stress and guilt, but now that he was about to see Remus and Harry again he felt ashamed. He was supposed to be doing better. His Elemental magic was in control now and he was falling more in love with Ginny with every letter they exchanged.

So why couldn't he stop cutting? Why was he so weak? Harry had been through so much more than him. Neville had no right, no excuse. Biting his lips, he let go of his arms and promised himself that he would never do it again. He wouldn't add to his brother's problems by letting him down.

Taking a deep breath, the teen pushed open the door of the falling-down shack and stepped into a
beautiful entrance hall. It was almost nine in the morning and he heard voices in the dinning room. He smiled and went to the doorway, glad he had caught them at breakfast. Neville hadn't told anyone he was coming. He wanted it to be a surprise.

The smile fell off his face when he saw who was sitting around the table. Snape looked as he always did, his expression bland as he sat at the head of the table. Sirius looked healthier than Neville remembered. His skin had color and his eyes had lost the wild quality that had never really left them. Remus was laughing at something Sirius had said. He looked kind and worn as he always did, but Draco Malfoy was sitting in the chair Neville always used and a complete stranger sat next to him in Harry's chair.

"I-I'm sorry… I didn't mean to interrupt…" Neville trailed off in complete confusion.

"Nev!" the stranger called out, his voice warm and deep.

It reminded him oddly of Snape, although the Potions Professor never sounded so friendly. In fact, now that Neville was paying close attention to the teen standing and coming toward him, he could see a little bit of Snape in his features. He was startled out of his deeply bewildered thoughts when the stranger hugged him.

"What are you doing here? You told me you couldn't come until the seventh!"

"Surprise…” Neville whispered weakly as he finally figured things out. "Happy birthday, Harry."

"I'm not Harry anymore, if I ever was." His brother pulled away with a Snape-ish smirk. "I'm Shadow Harold Lilium Snape. Nice to meet you."

Neville gasped and staggered backward. Under jet-black curls, one green eye and another blue stared back at him. The sight sent his heart crashing into his stomach with instinctual fear as children stories he had grown up on came flooding into his mind.

The new Harry frowned with worry. "Nev? What's wrong?"

"I'm sure he is just surprised that you look so different. It's quite the shock," Remus said hurriedly. He came over to the teens and grabbed Neville's arm gently. "Why don't you come sit down?" He guided him to a chair, but Neville couldn't stop staring in shocked horror.

"B-b-but…” he protested as he was pushed into a chair at the table.

"At least he doesn't have Snape's nose!" Sirius laughed loudly.

"You were not informed about the adoption?" Severus questioned curiously, lifting an eyebrow at his son.

"I told him," Shadow answered, crossing his arms over his chest. "Perhaps not that my appearance would change. I wanted to surprise him." His eyes narrowed at those around the room. "But don't think for one moment I'm fooled. Neville's reaction is much more than just surprise at my new appearance. What's going on?"

Neville noticed the significant glances going around the room and the heavy silence. He realized that he had just spilled the beans about the significance of Harry's new eye color and rather clumsily at that. Flushing hotly with a horrid mix of embarrassment, shame, and apology, he tried to fix his mistake. "It's nothing. I just… didn't expect Draco, and then you look…” he trailed off weakly when Harry slashed his hand violently through the air.
"Don't, Nev. This isn't your fault. I can feel their nervousness. They're hiding something from me and they know how much I hate that." Shadow stared at the adults and then finally turned to Draco. "I'm surprised you're a part of this. What's going on?"

"It's not that impressive," the blond sniffed and Neville wished he could be that calm and collected. "When a single individual has two different colored eyes it is a condition called **Heterochromia iridium**. Years ago there were superstitions about such people. The beliefs varied from the people being cursed and bringers of bad luck, having the ability to see magic or into the spirit realm, and to having an ability called the Evil Eye."

"Excuse me?" Shadow asked icily, enunciating each syllable.

"We've evolved past such superstitions," Severus spoke up. He took a bite of eggs before continuing. "With the advancement of medical magic, it has been made known that eye color is determined by the amount of melanin present in your irises. It has nothing to do with ones magic or the status of one's luck."

Neville had no idea what the Professor was talking about and he wasn't the only one. Sirius looked just as confused.

Remus smiled at them and explained. "Melanin is produced by your body. It's basically brown pigmentation. Blue eyes are due to a lack of melanin, while brown eyes indicate melanin-rich irises. Green is in the middle of the scale between blue and brown. This is also why many babies are born with blue eyes. Their eyes change color later as they begin to produce more melanin."

"So I have different amounts of melanin in my eyes?" Shadow asked impatiently.

"Yes." Severus nodded his head.

"So we can even it out."

"No," Remus said gently. "We can't. It's not like a vitamin you can take or a nutrient that we can give you. Melanin is produced by the body and we have no way of increasing or decreasing that production. Even if we did, it would only darken or lighten both eyes, leaving the difference of grade alone. Eye color is genetic, otherwise everyone's eye color would constantly change depending on their diet."

"If it's not a big deal anymore, then why did Neville react that way?" Shadow demanded furiously.

"I'm sorry," Neville said miserably, sinking down in his chair at the glares coming at him from the blond Slytherin and Sirius. "It's just… the stories…"

"What stories?" Shadow hissed, now glaring at him too.

"I believe he is referring to children stories," Severus drawled and patted his lip with his napkin. "The villains and/or the mysterious seer in children stories often has multi-colored eyes. Usually one brown and one blue eye."

"Great!" Shadow flung up his hands. "No matter what I do, I'm a freak! So what does this mean for me? Are people going to stone me for going out in public?"

"No," Draco laughed. "Hardly. They may stare a bit, but really they'll just deliberately ignore you and give you space. I thought that was what you wanted anyway?"

Shadow curled his lip in disgust. "I'm glad you all think this is no big deal. If you really felt that way,
you would have told me sooner. Thank you, by the way. I would have loved going out there unprepared and being ostracized for a reason I couldn't fathom." With that, he stormed from the room.

All eyes turned to Neville. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"What is your problem, Longbottom?" Draco hissed furiously.

"Be fair," Remus scolded the others. "Neville wasn't expecting Harry to look different, let alone for him to have heterochromia. It is a bit… startling at first."

Draco didn't say anything as he stood and went after his friend. Neville watched him go miserably. He wished he had never come. Remus put a warm hand on his shoulder, but it didn't make him feel better.

"We were planning on broaching the topic in a week or so," Severus said coldly. "It was decided Shadow needed more time to adjust from the series of shocks that have overwhelmed him these last few months. The subject is a sensitive one and the goal was to avoid having my son believe he is a freak once again. This could have been prevented had you merely informed us of your arrival. We would have revealed the sensitivity of the situation you were walking in to."

"Let off, Snape. He just wanted to surprise Harry." Sirius sighed. He was as disappointed as all of them about how his godson had found out, but what could be done about it now? Neville looked down right ill and Severus was only making it worse.

"And this is why I despise surprises. Please remember, both of you, that the name Harry is no longer appropriate. His name is Shadow," Severus sneered and left the room.

Neville moaned and put his head in his hands. "I'm always messing things up."

"No, you're not. I told Severus he should tell Harry, I mean Shadow, sooner than this," Remus consoled. "He was really happy to see you."

"He shouldn't be. How stupid can I be? They're just eyes," he said with self-hatred. He punched his thigh. "And now Draco hates me. And Professor Snape…"

"They don't hate you." Sirius ruffled the teen's hair. "Really, they're just being dramatic. You know Slytherins. It'll blow over in a year or two…"

Neville groaned again and Remus glared. "Sirius!"

"What? It was only a joke." He laughed at them. "Come on. Let's go find everyone." The man stood and grinned down at the Gryffindor. "I got you a really cool present. Do you want me to go up and get it? It might make you feel better."

"No, thanks." Neville smiled weakly back. "Maybe later though."

Sirius shrugged and the three went in search of Shadow.

xXxXxXx

"Why didn't you tell me?" Shadow demanded, glaring hotly at his best friend. His magic was swirling about the room, pulling books off the library shelves and slamming them down on the table. Two books were already open and the pages were turning rapidly back and forth. Draco was shocked they hadn't ripped out of the binding yet.
"It's not a big deal," he coaxed. "I would have mentioned it before we went anywhere. Maybe as a clever joke."

"Why are you treating this so lightly?" Shadow roared. He lifted his hand and flung a stinging hex at the blond.

Draco dodged and had his wand up and aimed in less than a second. He cast a tripping hex. "Why are you taking it so personally?" he countered, angry.

"No dueling in the library, please," Severus drawled, entering silently. He lifted an arm and pointed to the doorway. "To the dueling room. Now. Both of you."

"I'm not a child who can be sent away!" Shadow exploded.

Books few from the shelves and slammed into walls and crashed into furniture. Draco cast a quick shielding spell as three books came flying toward his head while Severus deflected the one aimed at his person. Shadow stormed up to his father, strange eyes blazing with fury and power. Draco held his breath. Despite his act, he knew exactly what kind of damage his best friend was capable of.

"Leave me alone, Snape." Shadow looked back over his shoulder and skewered the blond on his stare. "You, too. I don't want to see either of your faces for a while."

He pushed past Severus and slammed the door behind him. The smaller thuds of the books falling echoed afterward. They stood silently for a few seconds, just surveying the mess.

Draco picked up a book by his feet and said softly, "I've never seen him act like that. Why is he so upset?"

Severus stepped further into the room and picked up a few books. They could have done it magically, but they needed the idle work to help them think. "His reaction is complicated and has much to do with how he was treated at the Dursleys."

"He's told me about them and the alters that formed because of it," Draco offered. He hoped if Severus knew Shadow had confided in him, it would be all right if he did as well.

Severus nodded and carefully turned the pages in the book he was holding as he explained. "I believe the adoption has effected him on an emotional level more than he knows. It brings forward old insecurities and needs. His first family abandoned him by dying. His second family thought him a freak, using that as a reason to inflict physical and emotional torture so strenuous that it shattered his mind. Just as he got free of his second family, he has willingly - something I'm sure he thought he'd never do - accepted a third family. Irrational as it may seem, he is terrified of being viewed as a freak for fear those he loves will either abandon him or abuse him."

Draco straightened the books on the table into a pile, fiercely frowning. His hair fell into his face and he impatiently hooked it behind his ear again. He had never thought past the obvious what the adoption could mean for Shadow. Why had his friend agreed at all? Silas certainly wouldn't have wanted a parental figure of any kind. And, although Gabriel may have been more friendly and caring of other people, he was also fiercely independent. He would have no use for a parent, either.

"Why did he agree, sir?"

"Logically, it was the best move. It hides him from the world, granting him a freedom and anonymity he has always craved, but it was also attractive because having a father that will care for and protect him has been a secret wish, seen most clearly through the alter Rose and her need for love. Any child to suffer so would long for the same."
Draco could understand that. As angry as he was with Lucius, he still remembered the father he used to look up to. He often missed that man, but at least he still had his mother. Shadow never had anything good to remember. He only had fantasies. It was no wonder that Shadow had accepted despite his fears.

"So what do we do?" Draco asked, biting his lip in an uncharacteristic display of fear. What if Shadow never forgave him for not telling him about his eyes? What if Shadow used this stupid fight to push him away?

"You remain his friend. It is I his fears revolve around," Severus reassured. He put the books he held down on the table and flipped his fingers. "Please return my library to normal."

"Yes, sir," Draco answered out of habit and sighed as the man left the room without giving him a chance to retract his agreement. Oh, well. It wouldn't take him that long, and he wasn't eager to run into Shadow again until his friend had a chance to cool off anyway.

xXxXxXx

Neville, Remus, and Sirius were heading up the stairs when they heard the library door slam. They all turned and looked down just in time to see Shadow run toward the front door. The teen flung it open and morphed into his animal form before bolting.

Sirius cursed and turned into a dog, running out the door that Shadow had left open. Remus and Neville hurried after them both, but by the time they reached the front yard neither animal were in sight.

"We can't use magic… It might draw the wrong kind of attention to this area," Remus fretted, shading his eyes as he scanned the area.

"They can't trace my magic," Neville said grimly and took a deep breath.

He hadn't ever tried to access his Earth magic without his teacher there, but this was an emergency. He knew better than anyone the lengths one could go to in a fit of emotional distress. He had to find Shadow before anything like that happened.

The trance-like state came over him slowly. He relaxed into it, eyes closed. As he slowly reached for the surface level of his unique magic, it felt like his feet melted and stretched into the soil that he stood on. The landscape opened up around him, like lights coming on in the dark. He could see in all directions and slowly his perception unfurled further out as he searched for two specific animals living on his surface.

His senses travelled down at the same time as up as his awareness climbed into the trees and bushes as well as bloomed along roots and tunnels. He felt the vibrations of many creatures and lifeforms living within his folds. Many beautiful plants took from him sustenance and he provided for them joyfully.

He forced himself to focus and felt it: the vibrations of two animals running along his surface. He touched the nearest trees and they whispered happily, telling him of the creatures passing underneath them: one a scratch and climber, the other a digger. It was Shadow and Padfoot.

It use to be agonizing to withdraw from the Earth, but now he only sighed wistfully. He opened his eyes and started jogging in the direction he knew they were running. Remus followed silently, trusting him and not asking for an explanation. That meant more to Neville than he cared to admit. Very few people in the world trusted him to be competent.
They traveled almost twenty minutes before they found Padfoot whining and worrying at a small burrow in the ground. Sweat-soaked, they both stopped. Neville bent over, panting, but Remus was fine. He hurried forward and grabbed Padfoot by the scruff of his neck.

"Oh, Paddy," Remus sighed, noticing the scratch marks on the dog's nose and mussel. "You have to learn not to push people."

The dog morphed and Remus stepped back. Sirius grinned sheepishly and patted at his bleeding cheek and nose. "Guess he didn't want to talk to me."

"Har… Shadow," Remus called. "Come out. We won't make you go back to the house. We just want to talk to you."

A hiss and growl was their only response.

Neville didn't know what made him think to do it, but suddenly he was morphing into his own Animagus form. Roots piercing deep into the ground, finding purchase in the solid earth, he rose tall, stretching toward the sun that warmed and filled him with energy. The two human shapes under his branches stood silent and still as a sudden blur shot from the burrow and nimbly climbed his sturdy trunk. The lynx settled in his branches as if it had been doing so all it's life.

Shadow morphed reluctantly to call down, "Go back. I don't want to talk to you right now."

"But Harry…" Sirius pleaded, stepping closer to Neville's trunk.

"It's Shadow," he responded coldly. "I need time to think. Go. Away."

"Come on, Siri," Remus encouraged, giving Shadow a sorrowful glance.

The two men turned, both shooting repeated glances backward, probably hoping he would call them back, but Shadow had no intention of doing so. He was pissed, and more than that, he was hurt. To prove he wouldn't call them back, he turned into a lynx. The men didn't look back after that.

Shadow got comfortable in the tree branches. It felt right, being up here. He felt as sturdy as he did on the ground and he allowed his mind to drift. He had felt awkward about his eyes from the beginning. Now it was a hundred times worse. He closed them tight, knowing that even in his lynx state his DNA had affected them. Instead of two golden eyes, one was a deep amber.

The pressure of his emotions built up in him and he yowled. It was intolerable! And the worst of it was he couldn't talk to his father about it. He depended on Severus; the man had become his therapist and helped him mend his broken mind. That trust had morphed into a mutual bond, but ironically because of that bond Shadow no longer felt he could talk to him. He couldn't tell his therapist the same things that he would tell his father. At least, not about the things that involved Severus. He still felt comfortable discussing his Dissociative Identity Disorder, but not this. And he needed someone to talk to.

A gentle, warm wind curled around the hills. The leaves of his sanctuary whispered and rustled. Suddenly he remembered just who he was perched on and felt like an idiot. He had someone to talk to right here. He allowed himself to return to his freakish human form. Carefully maneuvering his longer limbs, he put his back to the sturdy trunk and allowed his legs to dangle to either side of the branch he sat on.

"I guess I thought becoming Shadow Snape meant leaving behind Harry Potter for good. For a few days, I actually thought that all my baggage would just melt away." He laughed painfully. "How stupid was that? The famous lightning scar is still on my head and now on top of that I have these
eyes…” He threw his head back hard, banging it against wood. "God, why am I being punished? Why can't I, just for once, get something without having to pay a goddamn price?"

The tree under him began to shrink and he fell off his branch. He hit the ground hard and crumpled to his knees, Bruised but not broken, he thought carelessly. He looked up into the now unshaded sky and smiled miserably at his brother who came to stand domineeringly over him. It didn't last long. Neville crouched and put their faces level. Shadow unclenched muscles he didn't know were knotted. God, he was such a mess.

"I'm sorry, Shadow. I overreacted," Neville said softly, imploring. Shadow could almost taste his urgency. "I was shocked that you look so different. I was shocked that Draco was at the house when I know how secret it is."

Shadow narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to protest, but Neville raised a hand and stopped him.

"I know he's your friend and we can trust him, but that doesn't change the fact that it surprised me." Neville put his hands on his brother's shoulders. "Yes, there are stories about people with two-colored eyes, but Draco's right. It's not that big of a deal anymore. Muggleborns don't even think twice. In fact, I bet they think it's cool. And it is kinda pretty…"

"God, Nev." Shadow laughed, pushing him away. "I get it. I'm not a freak in a bad way."

"You're not a freak at all," Neville protested hotly, angry now. "You need to stop thinking like that. You've been through hell. I'm not denying that. I know how the things you go through can crush you, but it hasn't, Shadow." He looked away, tears rising in his eyes. "You are the strongest, most capable person I know. I don't think you realize just how admirable you are."

"Stop," Shadow begged.

Neville chuckled, turning back to his brother. "You sound like Snape."

Shadow flushed. It was true. Wasn't he thinking just the other day how sad it was that Severus couldn't accept gratitude or compliments? "That's annoying," he admitted, smiling when Neville laughed harder. "Okay. I can admit that I've survived and overcome a lot. I am proud of myself. I've been able to piece my personality together and it wasn't easy."

"See that wasn't so hard." Neville pushed his shoulder playfully. "What I'm trying to get at is that you are different from the norm. Most people would be dead in your shoes and you know it. You're special…” Shadow winced at the term. "You are," Neville insisted. "And your eyes are different, but they're normal for you. And that works."

Shadow shot his brother a wry grin. "Your pep talks are always strange, but… I think I get what you're saying."

“Good.” Neville smiled. "You're my brother and nothing can change that, right?"

Shadow rolled his eyes. "You know that."

"Well, the Professor is still your father no matter your eyes and Draco is your friend and…”

"Alright! Everyone still loves me. I'm not a freak," he exclaimed pushing Neville back to make him shut up.

"Just so we're clear.” Neville smiled.
"Yeah, yeah," Shadow waved him off. He sighed, looking off into the distance. "So I overreacted. Great. Now how am I gonna face Severus and Draco after all my dramatics?"

"I'm sure you'll manage," Neville snarked.

"Maybe we could camp out here for a couple of days," Shadow suggested hopefully, his blue and green eyes sparkling. "I can hunt for my food and you can just soak it up."

"Sounds good, but I don't think..." Neville trailed off as Shadow's face suddenly paled. His pupils dilated and he fell backward.

Neville cried out in surprise, trying to catch his brother, but he wasn't quick enough. With a dull thud, Shadow landed on his back and began to convulse. The violence of the episode slowly increased until the tremors turned into spastic thrashing.

"Oh Merlin oh Merlin oh Merlin..." Neville chanted as he was slapped and hit as he wrestled with his friend, trying to keep him still. "Help! Merlin, I need HELP!"

But no one was around to hear. Sobbing, terrified, he could only fight helplessly against the fury of the seizure. White, blood-speckled spittle foamed at Shadow's lips, his eyes rolled wildly under his lids. Then, without warning, the seizure started to lessen until Shadow lay unconscious on the ground, faint tremors still running through his muscles every few seconds.

Neville's harsh breathing roared in his own ears. He put his fingers quickly over Shadow's throat to make sure he was still breathing. His hands shook badly, but he finally found it. Shadow's pulse beat against his fingers, but he had no idea if it were fast or slow. He tried measuring it against his own heart, but he was so upset that was useless.

"H-h-harry?" he whimpered. His brother didn't stir. "Oh, Merlin." he groaned. "I dropped you. You're still sick and I got you upset and I dropped you from my branches." Curling around himself, he began to rock, a panic attack overwhelming him. "I've killed you. I've killed you."

Pain slid into his horror-filled brain and he gasped, looking down. His nails were digging viciously into his forearms, opening old cuts, creating new. Blood slid over skin, fell invisibly into the soil and he could think again. Harry was sick, but he wasn't dead. He had to go get Remus or Professor Snape or Sirius.

He stood, biting his lip. It felt like a really bad idea to leave Harry lying there helplessly. Nodding, he took out his wand and cast a strong Disillusionment Charm. Harry's form shimmered and then went invisible as the eye slid around his body. Good.

"I'll b-b-be right back, Harry. I-I-It'll be alright," he promised before turning and running.

**Inner Demons**

Bright white light - blinding - shattered the darkness. Furious to be awoken, Demon clawed for full possession, but it was like fighting through a blizzard. The mental terrain rocked and flared chaotically. Icy shards of terror whipped at him, threatening to drown him under again as Boy's consciousness flailed against his. A living memory of unending agony howled past his ears - Growling back because he wants to hear those screams in a different voice.

Demon cradled the consuming fear and undying pain to his chest - Raging - He slammed Boy down into the cold, quiet dark. Shoved until he was flying up on wings of hate. Slipping and sliding on uncertain ground until the white fades away in a dying red curtain against his eyelids.
He feels the weakness of his body. His skin pulls taunt against still healing scars as he regulates his breathing. Fingers and limbs tremble with exhaustion, but the magic… Oh, the magic is still there, burning to be used, to *destroy* the ones who completely *devastated* the Boy who shared his darkness. The one given to him to sleep beside. The one who had always whispered to him flashes of a hell and terror untasted by the sane. He had always whispered back. Whispered, from his sleeping lips, *revenge*, painted in blood and screams and pain.

Because that is life - It was better to sleep; it was better to crouch in the darkness. Boy only brought back more *suffering* when he visited life, found comfort only in the deep dark, locked in. Demon hated life - Hated the blue sky above him that mocked his rage and his Boy's agonized existence.

Demon bellowed, fisting his hands and flinging them upward with a wave of the dark, icy power that condensed on his skin like dew. Color the sky with his *Hate* and *Fury*! Color it black as all things should be black. Storm clouds gathered and blue lightning snapped and crashed, tearing it asunder - And he laughed! Laughed and pulled his *rage* and *hunger* close. He wanted to rip apart the world, but first… But first…

He sat up and stood, growing more furious with every pain and ache that whispered along his disgustingly fragile body. He bared his teeth to the grass and cool breeze. He would spare the world - for now - First he had to hunt.

Self-denial - It hurt. It hurt so badly; he wanted to *kill, rend, destroy*! But, no… Not yet… He had to find the ones who shattered his Boy beyond comfort, beyond peace - who made the *whimpers* echo endlessly in the dark where he slept…

Demon screamed at the heavens, head tilted back, oblivious to the cold rain pelting his face. He screamed and wrapped his arms around his chest - straight-jacket tight. A naked, repulsive face - a whisper-memory from Boy… and Demon opened hungry, inhumane eyes, looked into the distance and *demanded* with all that was in him for the answer to his *need*…

… and he disappeared with a crack of thunder that shook the ground.

**xXxXxXx**

"Help!" Neville cried, bursting into the house. Remus and Draco came running out of the library. Sirius came skidding over from the dining room. Severus appeared at the top of the stairs. "Harry! Seizure! *Hurry*!" he choked out, panting.

"Where is he?" Severus demanded, practically flying down the stairs. Remus and Sirius had already bolted out the front door, Draco close on their heels.

"Outside. Disillusioned," Neville gasped as his teacher grabbed him roughly by the arm and began to run after the other two adults.

"I hope you can find him," Severus growled darkly.

Neville was about to answer when the perfectly clear sky began to darken. Lightning flashed and thunder followed in a near deafening roar. In seconds, it was almost as dark as night. Remus and Draco cast Lumos to light the way while Padfoot ran nimbly ahead. Severus, however, stopped.

"Too late…" he whispered and aimed a tripping hex at the blond Slytherin.

Draco went down hard, but he rolled and jumped right back to his feet. His teeth were bared and shone as lightning flashed above. Severus made a hand gesture. Neville couldn't believe it, but Draco
instantly backed down and began hurrying back toward them.

"Too late for what?" Neville whispered, horrified. "To late for WHAT?"

"Shadow's gone. Demon's loose," Severus answered distractedly, his black eyes pinned to where Remus and Padfoot had disappeared. Draco came up, his face pale and his eyes wide as he overheard.

"Shouldn't we get Remus and…” Neville's teeth were chattering and he couldn't get his breath.

“No." Severus shook his head. "They're too far. Omi!"

The elf appeared with a crack. His blue eyes were glowing. "Powerful magic, Master."

"Neutralize it as quickly as you can," Severus ordered. "Draco come with me."

"Yes, sir," the blond answered quickly.

"What about me?" Neville called at their backs. His arms were wrapped tightly around himself and he had to bite his lip to keep from screaming.

Severus didn't even stop to answer. "The clouds are breaking up. I suspect Demon has left the area. Go see if the mutt and wolf managed to get killed before my son vanished." The front door to the house slammed on the last word.

Neville stumbled in the direction he had left Harry. Tears streaked his face, black dots swam in his view, and he knew he was going to pass out soon if he didn't get air into his lungs. Two silhouettes appeared over the next hill and he fell to his knees, unable to go any further. Covering his face in shame, he wept. Cold rain soaked into his clothes and skin, slowly lessening as the sun began to peak through the dark black and green streamers streaked across the sky.

"Hey, are you all right?" Remus crouched before him. His graying, light brown hair dripping and sticking to his face. Gentle hands took his and ran up his arms, finding the bleeding. Remus sighed and tore his sleeve, wrapping the cloth around the tears. "This will do for now. Let's get you into the house where I can heal you."

"What happened?" Sirius asked insistently. "That was Demon, right?"

Neville nodded numbly. "It's my fault… I dropped him… My fault…”

"No." Remus shook him slightly. "Neville, listen to me. This wasn't your fault. Come on. Get off the wet ground. I'll explain once we get you warm."

The teen allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and followed after the two men. Remus settled him in the sitting room and began tending to his clothes and cuts, casting a flawless stream of magic. Sirius paced agitatedly, muttering every now and then.

"Listen, Neville," Remus said firmly, looking into the teen's shell-shocked eyes. "Shadow is still ill. He came very close to dying in that graveyard. Not one part of his body was left undamaged except for his head. A lot of very powerful magic was all that held him together for a while. As his body heals and slowly starts taking over jobs that were done by magic, there can be occasional surges or short-circuits. I've been doing all I can to filter and soothe the magical and physical systems at work in his body, but he will have a few seizures. It's unavoidable. He's already had one. Four days after he was brought here. Nothing you did brought this seizure on. There are no warning signs."
"This... h-h-has happened... b-b-before?" Neville gasped.

"Yes," Sirius said with uncharacteristic grimness. "And an alter came Out then, too, but it was Boy."

Remus sighed and sat tiredly next to Neville on the couch. He covered his eyes with a hand. "It was horrible. Boy is significantly worse than he was last summer, if you can imagine that."

Neville shook his head, eyes wide again. No. He couldn't. He remembered terrified green eyes staring unblinking at him from under the couch. Harry had curled up into a ball, rocking and whimpering and broke into loud helpless sobs and almost incoherent pleas if anyone made any move toward him. How could it be worse?

"It was like he was a wild animal. He didn't speak at all. He huddled in the corner, snarling and shaking. He wet himself, he was so afraid," Sirius rasped. He ran his hands through his hair before balling them into fists. "We had to leave the room before he would calm down at all, and then he just collapsed and cried... I've only heard that kind of crying in once place... Azkaban."

"Boy is completely insane now. The abuse he has suffered for years and the torture this summer... It was too much for any human to endure, let alone a helpless child," Remus agreed softly. "Especially since Boy's mentality is that of a five-year-old."

Neville covered his face and cried in grief for his friend. Remus soothed him, pulling him into a hug. Sirius knelt and rubbed the teenager's back. They sat that way for long minutes before Severus entered the room. He was dressed all in black with a robe folded over his arm.

"I'm going to retrieve my son. I am familiar with your ineffectiveness, but endeavor to maintain the house while I'm gone. Perhaps strengthen the wards. And no further magic outside!"

"You can't possibly blame us for what happened?" Sirius snarled, jumping to his feet.

"What were you thinking leaving him alone outside? What was he doing out there in the first place?" Severus bellowed, eyes dark and deadly.

"What are you going to do when you find him?" Remus spoke quickly, hoping to stave off the argument.

Severus sneered, but didn't answer. He turned and stalked from the house, slamming the door hard in his wake. Draco took his place in the doorway. He was rolling down his sleeves. "Would anyone care to explain what's going on?"

Remus gestured to an empty chair with his free hand and began to explain again. He knew Neville hadn't really absorbed what he'd said the first time around and talking about Shadow's condition was better than doing nothing.

As Remus began to explain again, Sirius growled softly and returned to pacing. He didn't know what that snarky bastard planned to do. Demon was pretty much unstoppable; his magic was too wild. What would he and Moony have been able to do had they stayed outside with the boys? They couldn't stop Demon coming Out or going on a rampage, and if it had happened in the house, it would have been a miracle if the walls were left standing. The greasy bastard had a lot of nerve blaming them.

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Neville and Draco sat stiffly and silently in the sitting room alone. Remus and Sirius were busy doing as Severus demanded and Omi was outside working frantically to try and erase the magical residue
that had spilled all over around their hiding place, showing anyone who cared to look where they were. They had been sitting there, doing nothing, for about an hour when Severus came stalking into the room with Remus and Sirius on his heels. Both teens jumped to their feet.

"Lupin informs me that you were able to find Shadow with your Elemental magic." Severus got straight to the point, black eyes boring into the Gryffindor. "Can you do it again?"

Draco watched Longbottom pale. He frowned. "You can't find him, Professor?"


"I… I don't… I don't know…" Neville stuttered.

Severus sneered and opened his mouth, but Remus brushed passed him. He stood in front of Neville, blocking his view of the others, and put his hands on his shoulders. "You're comfortable working at the surface level of your magic; you can do this, Nev. I know we're asking a lot. You've never had to cover so much distance before, but Harry needs you. All we can do is ask you to try."

Draco didn't know what Elemental magic was, but he had a feeling it wasn't something to sneer at. As he watched, the clumsy Gryffindor seemed to straighten, his posture becoming confident. Draco realized that he and Shadow stood a good two inches shorter than Longbottom, and he had a feeling that the Gryffindor was only going to get taller, stronger. He was beginning to have a glimmering of understanding as to why Shadow was so close to the seemingly incompetent teen.

"I'll try," Neville said firmly, purpose burning in his eyes as he nodded firmly. "I'll do anything to help Harry."

Severus nodded and turned. They all filed out after him, going back outside where Neville could better access his magic. To prevent onlookers from getting suspicious or noticing the activity up at the old house, Severus led them all into the sparse woods. It would grant them enough cover to work by.

Without saying anything, Neville sat on the grass. The others hung back silently as the teen put his hands to either side of him, digging his fingers into the ground. Back straight, Neville closed his eyes. He slid easily into a trance and his unique magic bloomed in his mind like a map of life itself. Neville's consciousness broke free, ignorant of his body as he traveled along the veins and pulses of soil and vegetation that made up the earth's crust.

He whispered along the roots and trees, pushing into his mind the remembrance of the residue Demon had left behind at Hogwarts at the end of their third year. To this day, there was a round circle about seven feet in diameter near the lake where nothing grew. He looked for the same poisonous energies, a mate to the same dissonance Demon left at Hogwarts.

He floated along his magic, spinning himself out further than he had ever dared go before. Fear had always touched him, he had never really trusted this side to his magic, but for his brother, he could push past that and give himself up to who he was. Harry needed him and he refused to fail.

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Draco shifted uncomfortably. They had been standing there for half an hour. The sun was going to set soon and Longbottom was just sitting there. Nothing spectacular was happening. In fact, if he didn't know better - Severus surely would have thrown a fit, if it were so - he would have thought Longbottom was sleeping. The teen’s eyes were shut, his face was completely lax, and his breathing was slow and deep.
Lupin and Severus seemed unperturbed by the lack of anything happening, but Sirius had turned into Padfoot and disappeared. Draco caught sight of him every now and again prowling around the perimeter. His thoughts went to the lynx that had met him in these very woods. He remembered his fear of the deadly creature and his awe when the animal displayed playful affection instead of violence. Merlin, he hoped Shadow was all right.

Movement caught his eyes and Draco turned his attention back to where Longbottom napped - or whatever it was he was doing. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open as the teen slowly morphed. His form shimmered and elongated. It took the blond several seconds to realize he was seeing the Gryffindor turn into a tree.

"Is that supposed to happen?" he asked softly when he noticed Severus's and Lupin's instant concern.

"I hope so," Remus answered. "The oak tree is Neville's Animagus form, but he's been known to get lost in the Earth magic. Let's hope that isn't what just happened."

Draco coughed in surprise. "Animagus? Longbottom is an Animagus, too?"

Remus turned to him with a smile. "Yes. In fact, he's the youngest ever Animagus. He mastered the transformation several months before Shadow."

Draco couldn't believe it. Silently growling, he narrowed his eyes at the tall, young tree and vowed he would soon master the transformation as well.

Chapter end
Inner Demons

Neville brushed against the thing he sought. Ecstatic, he reached up and grew out of the ground he spread through. He reached for the sun, spread his leaves in joy as his roots absorbed the last of his magic and awareness, confining it within one small part of the vast Earth. He shook his leaves gently in the breeze, realizing what form he had taken. Focused, he carefully reversed the Animagus transformation and traded back to his human shape.

"I found him, Professor," Neville croaked happily. He stumbled forward and blinked in the sunlight… Wait… Sunlight?

Looking around, his eyes widened as he realized he wasn't in the woods by the house anymore. He stood on a street lined with identical boxy little houses. "Pr-pro-professor?" he stuttered, heart beginning to pound in fear. Where was he? What had happened?

Gasping, he closed his eyes and tried to think. He had been meditating. He opened his Earth magic and used it to search for Harry. And then… he had found him! Snapping open his eyes, Neville looked around, but he couldn't see Harry anywhere.

"Stupid…" Neville cursed himself and shut his eyes. He gently brushed against the earth's awareness and turned his head. Opening his eyes he stared at the little house: Number 4.

He had no idea how he got wherever he now was, but his brother was in that house… Well, Demon was in that house… Neville wrung his hands fearfully but then shook himself. Harry needed him. He had to go over. There wasn't anyone else here. He had no idea how to contact his teachers. It was up to him. Squaring his shoulders, he crossed the street.

The front door was unlocked. Sighing, nibbling his lip, Neville pushed it open. It made no sound and he stepped into the dimly lit room. It was quickly getting dark and there were no lights. Neville shut the door behind him and breathed in, readying to call out. He choked and gagged as the most horrific smells filled his mouth and lungs. It was… indescribable.

Shaking, he made his way into the living room to the right of a small staircase. There was nothing; no one was there. He turned around, now panting with his hand cupped over his nose, and made his way down a small hallway. Darkness gathered there and he could hardly walk, he was shaking so badly. The smell was getting worse. He pushed on the swinging door and jerked back, vomiting.

A body… A woman was… spread out on the kitchen table… It was naked and cut open from throat to pelvic. Purple, brown, ropy intestines and dark red and brown organs were draped around the chairs… wet, red-streaked bone… blood splattered the walls and dripped silently down to the floor… foot prints in red-brown gore… Merlin, the smell…

Neville ran back down the hall, vomiting again by the front door.

Gasping, crying, wild with shock, he clawed for the front door, but his hands were soaked with sweat and kept slipping. Whimpering, he grabbed with both hands… A creak sounded behind him at the top of the stairs…. He spun around with a choked scream… Nothing… His horrified eyes noticed the blood-footprints went up the stairs…

But it was silent… If Demon were still around… What if Harry were up there… Merlin… Neville
wiped his hands repeatedly down his shirt and pants as he made his way shakily up the stairs. Tears were running from his eyes, but he was silent, his breath coming in soft, quick pants. He pressed himself against the wall, avoiding the footprints.

The prints led to the first door on the right. The door was shut. Neville reached for it and it clattered in his shaking hand, but it wasn't locked. He turned the knob and the door swung open with a loud, long creak.

Neville stopped breathing. He stood frozen, his eyes wide and wild, but nothing moved; no demonic murderer jumped out and grabbed him. Releasing his breath in a sobbing hiss, he stepped away from the wall and cringingly looked into the room.

His eyes shied away from the color red - they skittered away from the fatty pile of skin and bones - the four limbs strewn like twigs - the neat pyramid of organs - Because in the corner, Harry sat huddled - his mismatched eyes wide and unseeing as he stared off into space, his legs drawn up to his thin chest. His brother hardly looked like he were breathing. His curls were heavy with blood and gore. Red smeared across his chalk-white cheek, covered his hands that were clenched on his knees.

"Harry!"

Neville ran to his brother, sliding in the filth. He gagged, his stomach dry-heaving. He ignored it as much as he could and grabbed his brother by the arm. Harry didn't react, didn't come out of his shocked stupor, but he was pliable. He stood at Neville's pulling insistence and trod, heavy-limbed, out of the gore-spattered room. His bare feet left fresh bloody prints down the stairs.

They broke out into fresh air, left the horror house behind. Neville pulled Harry down the street, panting and sweating. He stopped once to throw up bile, but he quickly continued on, down as far as he could away from that... massacre. Neville pushed it all away... He couldn't think about it right now. He had to get Harry safe.

They came upon a park and Neville saw a water fountain. He began to talk... Saying anything that came to mind... Mostly telling himself and Harry that everything as all right now. He took off his shirt and got it soaked. He wiped shakily at Harry's bloody skin. He couldn't do anything for the gore-spattered clothes, but he did his best. He just kept talking.

He'd just finished with his brother's hands when Harry began to shake, shake so hard that Neville feared it was another seizure.

"Nev..." he croaked, his voice raspy and rough. "Nev..." It was almost a plea.

"I'm here... It's all right now," Neville said hopelessly. He grabbed his brother into a tight embrace and clawed onto the last of his self-control. Not yet, he couldn't break down yet.

"I... I woke up... and Dursley..." he whispered, strangled. He was shaking his head numbly - back and forth, back and forth.

"The Dursleys?" Neville gasped. He began to understand what must have happened. Demon came for revenge. Still, he shuddered. What had happened in that house... It was so far beyond revenge that Neville didn't have a word for it... He shook his head hard. What did it matter? They had to get out of here. "Do you know how to get back to the house?" Harry said nothing and Neville shook his shoulders. "Harry!" Still nothing. "Shadow!"

"Wha-"

"The house... Severus... Do you know how we can get back?" Neville asked clearly, his eyes
pinned to the glassy blue and green orbs in front of him.

"Severus…" Shadow lifted a hand. A silver ring sat on his middle finger. "Need a knife or a razor," he said dully.

Neville shivered again and easily summoned his own cutting razor. He handed it over wordlessly. He stared as Shadow cut across his opposite thumb and smeared the blood on the silver band. Shadow wrapped his arms around Neville's waist tightly and ground out. "Take me home."

They vanished in a silent gust of wind.

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Full night had fallen and they were all still standing around the oak tree when Omi appeared with a crack. "Master! Young Master Shadow and sir Neville have appeared in Master Shadow's bedroom, sir!"

"What?" Remus gasped.

Severus had already taken off at a dead sprint back toward the house. Padfoot barked and raced after him, Draco following behind. The werewolf cast his eyes back to the oak tree. It had definitely not been there before. How could Neville be at the house with Shadow and yet he was here in his Animagus form?

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Shadow got up from the floor and walked quickly out of the room. Neville stood more slowly, trying to get his bearings. It didn't take long to recognize Harry's room back at the house. He sighed in relief and hurried after his brother. He made it to the doorway just as he saw the bathroom door shut and heard the sound of a lock turning.

"Harry? Are you all right?" Neville flushed. It was a very stupid question. How could Harry be okay after all this?

"Just… Give me a minute… Okay?"

The sound of water running came through the door and Neville understood completely how his brother was feeling. He felt his own urge to bathe and scrub his skin until it was raw. Shivering, he wrapped his arms around his chest and turned to face the pounding of someone running up the stairs.

Professor Snape came around the corner and came swooping down on him. "What. Is. Going. On?" the man demanded, his hands clawing into Neville's shoulders.

Sirius came running up behind him, silently demanding his own answers.

"I don't know what happened," Neville answered. He felt like he was numb. Everything was happening too fast. He blinked slowly. "I was searching for Harry. I went further than I've ever done before. Then… It felt like I grew up out of the ground. I realized I was in my Animagus form and I transformed back. I was on a street I didn't know… But I could feel the echo of Demon's magic coming from Number 4. I didn't know how to get you, so I went in…"

Severus supported the teen as he suddenly stumbled sideways and began dry-heaving. "Deep breaths, Longbottom. You are safe."
The teen did as instructed and stood up again. His face was pale and sweaty.

"Finish your story."

Draco had arrived shortly after Black in the middle of Longbottom's explanation. Lupin arrived now and pushed Severus out of the way. He wrapped the shaken teen in an embrace and whispered supportively into his ear. Longbottom shuddered and looked close to breaking down completely. Severus felt sympathy, but he couldn't have that. He had to know the rest.

"Longbottom. Report," he barked. Lupin glared at him and he glared right back. Thankfully, the teen pulled himself together enough to respond.

"There was a body in the kitchen..." He shuddered again. "There were bloody footprints going upstairs. I followed, thinking Harry might be in trouble. It was worse than the kitchen. There was another body shredded... So much blood..." Neville moaned and covered his face.

"What about Shadow?" Draco demanded urgently.

Neville took a deep breath and answered, "He was in the corner. Just sitting there, staring into nothing. I think he was in shock. I got him out of the house and he came out if it a bit. I asked him how we could get back and he raised his hand. He cut his thumb and put the blood on the ring and he said, 'Take me home'. Then we were here. He went straight into the bathroom... Because he was covered in blood and... stuff..."

That was it. Neville completely crumpled, falling into Remus' arms. He began to sob and hyperventilate at the same time, his hands clutching painfully at Remus' shirt. In less than half a minute, he fainted. Remus cast a levitation charm on him and looked to Severus with strained, worried eyes.

"Where should I put him? Draco's in the room he normally stays in."

"Put him in with Shadow," Severus answered quickly. "Locate a second bed, if you must." He didn't waste any more time and quickly made his way downstairs.

"Wait. I'm coming with you," Draco called, hurrying after his teacher.

"No, you will not. Stay and help with Shadow." He didn't even turn around before he stepped outside, slamming the door behind him.

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Severus examined the house with a blank face. It was an all too familiar scene, throwing him back almost twenty years into the darkest days of his life. Moving forward decisively, he began to erase all evidence of his son. Removing any fallen hair, any sweat or blood residue that would link Shadow to the crime scene. The spells necessary to do so came easily. They were the first ones the Dark Lord had his followers master. The crimes boasted about, framed with the Dark Mark blazing in the sky, were only a fraction of the ones the Death Eaters actually committed.

He just finished when the Reflection Ward evaporated. He noticed the ward before entering Number 4. It was subtle but hard to craft. It basically concealed all magic within, but they were short-lived. It's existence around Number 4 explained why the Ministry wasn't swarming all over the scene yet.

All evidence of his son was gone, but the dark magic used to kill the two Dursleys still soaked the walls as did the residue of the acute suffering of the victims. It would draw attention very soon, but first... Severus walked out onto the lawn and shot the Dark Mark into the night sky before
Dissapparating.

Blaming the massacre on the Dark Lord would accomplish two things. The first being it further protected his son, forcing the authorities to look in the wrong direction for the guilty party. The second thing it did was throw the remaining Death Eaters - who were plotting his son's death - into a panic. They would be frantically trying to figure out which Death Eater committed the crime and why. They might even believe that the Dark Lord was back somehow and coming for them for their disloyalty, just as Harry Potter supposedly was come for them for revenge.

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Shadow stood naked, freshly washed and dry. The mirror reflected a face and body that he was still becoming familiar with. Thick scars wrapped around his torso and across his abdomen. Patches of burn scars covered his thighs and across his right ribs. His back looked like he had been mauled by a lion. Thin white lines ran down his arms, a thicker one ran from his right wrist to his elbow. Faint bruising - fading yellow - stained his shoulders, his collar bones, his calves, his lower back.

All of it evidence that he was still healing. The graveyard had marked his body and mind. It would be a long, long time before he was fully recovered. He knew this. Remus had told him over and over, 'Just give it time. Just rest. You will be strong soon,' but they hadn't told him everything about his recovery, did they? They didn't tell him about the potential to black out and have one of his remaining alters come to the surface.

"Shadow? I'm coming in."

Draco slipped into the steam-filled bathroom. He hesitated when he saw his friend standing with his back to him, completely naked, but then he took in the damage to Shadow's body. He turned and relocked the door, sealing it again with magic, before walking over to stand at his friend's side. Shadow had yet to move or acknowledge his entrance, but he wasn't in a stupor. His eyes were aware and traveling over his body, evaluating.

"What did they tell you?" Shadow asked calmly, as if there were nothing wrong in the world.

"Lupin explained that your body is almost oversaturated with magic," Draco answered carefully.
"The balance is very, very fragile and as the magic becomes less necessary and pushed out as your physical systems take over their rightful jobs, the balance can be disturbed. Seizures are not unexpected or completely avoidable, although Lupin is doing the best he can to soothe the transition."

"I see." There was a pause and Shadow traced over a ropy scar that marked his skin from his right hip to his left nipple. "And Demon coming Out?"

"The seizures affect your mind." Draco shrugged. He didn't fully understand the concept. "After the first seizure, Boy came Out."

Shadow smiled grimly. "What number was this one?"

"The second," Draco whispered. He finally realized that his friend was teetering on the precipice of something. "Shadow?"

"I am perfectly capable of murdering to protect myself," he said, returning to stare into his own weird eyes. "Dumbledore, for example. I certainly don't mourn for the Dursleys. They tortured me. Enjoyed it, even. I was a child in their care and Vernon whipped me, beat me, cut me, burned my body. I don't remember any of it, but Boy does. Boy lived through Vernon's abuse everyday for ten years.
"However, I do remember my Aunt. She treated me like a slave. She took pleasure from my submission. She poured hate down on my head every time she looked at me. She made me clean up my own blood and feces after her husband got through with me. I could see deep down into the bottom of her soul and she had not even a mote of sympathy for my suffering. She deserved to die.

"I don't feel bad that Demon killed them. I'm glad they are dead and I can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they will never hurt me again, but… Not like that." He finally turned his eyes to his friend. "What Demon did to them… It was disgusting, Draco. It was monstrous. He tore them limb from limb, dissected them."

Shadow covered his face, rubbing at it. Draco put an arm around his friend's shoulder and wished he knew what to say.

"I would have stabbed them in the heart… Maybe shot them in the head… Or perhaps poisoned them. They would suffer longer that way, but… Not… like that. Not like that."

"I know." Draco forced Shadow to turn from the mirror. "Look at me. It wasn't your fault. You couldn't control what Demon did. You were not responsible."

"Demon is inside me," Shadow yelled furiously, knocking Draco’s arms away from him violently. "Who else is responsible for his actions?"

"The Dark Lord," Draco snapped, grabbing Shadow’s shoulders in a relentless grip. He stared right into his friend’s wild eyes. "He's responsible. Demon didn't come from you. You didn't create him."

"I've made him stronger with my hate and anger," Shadow argued, crying now.

"Maybe so, but you didn't create him."

"This can't happen again, Draco!" Shadow pulled away and turned his back. "I can't stand here, afraid of what he'll do next. I can't stand here feeling like I have no control over him coming Out."

"You don't have to," Draco promised. "Your mental barriers are strong enough to keep him locked in. It's the seizures that free him, but Professor Snape made a potion to help with that. Every since your first seizure, he's been working on it. He just got it finished the day of your birthday while you slept. That's why he was so mad at Lupin and Black for letting you go outside alone. He has a potion that can keep you unconscious until you reassert control."

"God!" Shadow yelled, gripping his hair tightly. "Why didn't they tell me about the seizures? I could hex the shit out of them right now! First they keep the significance of my eyes a secret and now this! Tell me you didn't know," he growled, spinning around and glaring at the blond.

"I didn't know," Draco told him truthfully. "But we can control this. You'll be all right."

"I'll never be all right," he said exhaustedly. He walked back toward the tub and sat on the side. "I wish this nightmare would just end."

"It will." Draco strode over and sat next to him. "It will get better, Shadow. Everyday will get easier. And when problems come up, we'll figure out how to fix them. You're not going through this alone."

"I don't want to have to go through this at all." Shadow shook his head. "Can you hand me that robe? I'm beginning to feel a little naked."

Draco laughed and fetched the robe.
Shadow slipped it on, keeping his face averted, ashamed and disgusted with himself.

They sat silently for a while before Shadow was ready to leave the bathroom. Remus and Sirius were standing right there, obviously wringing their hands and worried to death. Shadow didn't really feel like talking to them. He brushed by without a word and ignored their questions. He walked into his room and found Neville asleep in his bed.

"I didn't know where else to put him. I can have Omi bring in another bed…" Remus rushed to explain.

"No. It's fine," Shadow answered sharply. He turned and faced the three standing in his doorway. "I'm tired. Go away."

"I need to run a few tests to see how you're doing," Remus said apologetically.

"Wouldn't want to risk another seizure, would we?" Shadow glared.

"We were going to tell you, but you were doing so well…" Sirius butt in.

"Don't," he warned, holding his hand up in a stop motion. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say about it." He turned and walked into his closet, shutting the door behind him.

Remus turned to look at the other two. "Why don't you go downstairs? I'll run a quick diagnostic and be down in a minute."

Draco turned and left - scowling and jealous as hell about Neville - but he left.

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Shadow flinched away from the blazing light falling across his face. Groaning, he opened his eyes to find his curtains wide open and his brother staring outside. "Nev?"

Neville jumped and spun around. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you, I just wanted to, I mean, look out the, I just…"

"Hey," Shadow said softly, sitting up. "It's all right. No big deal. I need to get up anyway."

"What?" Neville asked distractedly.

He wasn't really paying attention. He was studying Harry's face. It was so new, but it was amazing that he could still see the old Harry if he looked just right. It was in his mouth and nose, his forehead. Weird things that you don't really think of as being a big part of how you recognize someone, but they were. At the same time, he was certain that no one who didn't know Harry very well would have any idea that Shadow Snape was also Harry Potter.

The darker hair, curled no less. The blue eye, the green - not even the same color green as Harry's were before the graveyard. He was taller, his shoulders and hips smaller, and the scars. Even the
lightning bolt seemed less like an omen when paired with the damage Neville could see clearly since Harry had gone to bed without a shirt.

His thoughts cleared when Harry got out of bed. It was in his posture, the defeated way he hung his head so that his curls hid his face and the way his shoulders were hunched in. What his brother said finally sunk in. "Wait!... What do you mean? Harry, I don't care that you stayed in here."

Shadow self-consciously pulled on his robe. He had taken off his shirt for Remus so that he could check his scars and had fallen asleep before re-dressing. "I'm sorry for what you saw yesterday..."

Neville paled, but he walked over to his brother's side. "Stop. What happened yesterday... It was ghastly. There's no denying that..." He shook his head. "You're still my brother. What happened... It didn't happen because of you... It happened to you. I know that, and so should you."

"Thanks, Nev." Shadow lowered his head and roughly ran his hands through his hair. "God, what a mess, huh?"

"Hey..." Neville came up and gave his brother a hug. "It'll be okay. I'm sure Professor Snape and Remus will figure something out."

"I'm not sure anyone can stop it for good. The only way to do that is to get Demon out of my head." Shadow pulled away and walked back to the bed.

"Can we do that?" Neville asked, brown eyes lighting up at the prospect.

"I don't know." He fell back on the bed, covering his eyes with his arm. "I don't know anything anymore. I feel like my life is suddenly out of my control, but now that I look back I think it was out of control the second my name came out of that godforsaken cup."

"What can I do?" Neville sat next to him.

"I need a plan," Shadow said grimly and sat up. "I need a plan to cage Demon in my head - or get that monster out permanently. I still have to deal with Hogwarts and the Death Eaters. Draco's told me that they're desperate to find and kill Harry Potter because they think I'm some sort of Dark Creature out to kill them for revenge, and more immediately I have to handle my new father, my godfather, and my kind uncle Moony."

"Are you?" Neville asked quietly, eyes downcast.

"Am I what?"

"Are you out for revenge?"

Shadow sat there, silent, as his heart rate picked up. On one hand, he remembered the carnage from yesterday and it sickened him. He didn't want to willingly be a part of anything like that. On the other hand, his body was a maze of torment that would fade with time, but would never disappear completely. The only way to completely ensure his wellbeing was to stop them permanently. He was saved from answering when the door opened and Draco slipped in, shutting the door behind him.

"I wouldn't call it revenge." The blond wore black slacks and a grey T-shirt. His expression was serious, but there was something challenging and reproachful in his eyes when he looked at Neville. "I would call it self-defense. Because, as we're all aware, if they get their hands on Shadow again, it would be a fate worse than death. And even if they don't eventually kill him, we wouldn't get Shadow back like we did this time. Luck like that doesn't happen twice."
Shadow stood abruptly and moved to the window -

"I know that." Neville glared. "It's not like I -"

- He didn't even remember what happened to him -

"Then what is it like?" Draco interrupted icily. "It sounds like you want Shadow to feel guilty about stopping Death Eaters."

- but suddenly icy cold terror was creeping up his spine -

"I'm just worried that if it becomes more than defense that…"

- Dizzy, he swayed and grabbed the curtains -

"Harry!" Neville cried, but Draco was already moving.

"I'm fine," Shadow rasped, grabbing onto Draco and allowing the blond to help him back to the bed. "I just need a minute."

"Should I get Remus?" the Gryffindor asked anxiously.

"No," he pushed Draco away gently and took a few deep breaths, deliberately turning his thoughts to the present. "I can't think too hard about certain things," he explained, looking up at Neville. "But you're right to be worried about me. I want you to worry because when I stop worrying about the same thing, I'm going to need you to intervene." He studied his brother's face. It looked horrified. "I know that's a heavy burden, but you won't be alone. I'm sure Remus, Sirius, and Severus are on the job as well, but I count on you. You know? Be my Gryffindor conscience. It sometimes gets drowned out now that it's not a separate voice in my head."

Neville nodded a bit. His round cheeks pale and his eyes a bit wide. His right hand had come up to scratch softly at his left forearm. Shadow saw this and quickly moved his attention to Draco, hoping it would make his brother more at ease.

"But you're also right, Draco. I can't afford to ignore the Death Eaters. They have to be dealt with."

Shadow looked between them consideringly. He just now realized that the two hadn't had a chance to get to know each other or work together. They were so different, but he wanted them to get along.

"We've got your back," Neville said firmly. He squared his shoulders and stepped closer to the bed.

"The world would do best to get out of our way." Draco smirked, repeating what Shadow told him long ago. "We're in this together."

Shadow smiled.

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After the mild argument between Draco and Neville, the three teenagers went down to breakfast. It was several hours past the usual time the household ate, but everyone had waited for them to wake. The adults were silent, but that was normal for Severus. Sirius and Remus, however, looked guilty and remorseful. Neither of the men would meet Shadow's eyes. 

"Draco, Nev, would you excuse us?" Shadow asked calmly, standing as the last of the plates were vanished from the table. "I have a few things I'd like to discuss with our teachers."

Severus inclined his head, as if acknowledging a point to Shadow, before standing and leaving the
room. Sirius and Remus winced a bit, but followed obediently after the teen. Shadow wasn’t surprised to see Severus had retreated to the parlor instead of the sitting room. The parlor was the room Shadow associated with therapy and the setting would reinforce Severus's authority. That was fine. Let the man think he had the upper hand; Shadow didn’t plan on losing this battle.

"Have a seat," he smiled with mock gentleness. "I have a feeling we might be here for awhile."

Severus took his usual chair. Shadow purposefully avoided his normal spot on the couch across from him. Instead, he summoned a chair from the library and placed it at an angle to both Severus's chair and the couch, which Remus and Sirius had settled on. Shadow observed the men in front of him.

Severus looked calm, wearing black slacks and a long-sleeve button-down black shirt. His hair was loose and the lanky strands curtained his face, but he wasn't hiding behind it as of yet. He was a blank void to Shadow's empathy.

Remus wore thread-bare brown pants and an off-white button-up shirt. His legs were crossed defensively and his hands were clenched on his knee. His graying hair was pulled back in a low, short ponytail and his face was severely lined with stress and fatigue. The full moon was this week, and the deeper color of his amber made sure no one forgot it.

Next to him, Sirius fidgeted like a nervous child. He shifted his weight and bounced his knee. His black hair was combed, but it still looked a bit wild because of how frequently the man ran his hands through it. It was a nervous habit that he had developed in childhood. His face was still a bit thin, but his blue eyes were clear and sane. A definite improvement over last summer.

"I don't understand," Shadow began, leaning back in the chair and linking his fingers over his thin stomach. "You know how I feel about secrets, yet all three of you deliberately kept information about my condition from me. I'm trying to understand, really I am, but there just doesn't seem to be any acceptable justification for doing that."

Sirius opened his mouth, but Shadow held up his hand.

"You realize that had I known about the seizures, I would not have gone outside as I did. Draco informed me that you’ve created a potion, Severus, that would have kept me unconscious until I could reassert control over my mind?"

"Yes," Severus admitted when it was obvious his son was waiting for an answer.

"I murdered the Dursleys-"

"You didn't!" Sirius objected, jumping to his feet. Remus reached out and pulled him back down without a word, but his expression clearly showed that he agreed with his friend. "It was Demon! You didn't do it."

"I'm aware of what having an alter means," Shadow said coldly. "I don't need anyone here to explain it to me. This is my body. These are my hands. I wasn't in my right mind, but the Dursley's death resulted because of what is in my head. That could have been avoided had Severus administered the potion he's created. So… Not only did the murders happen because of me, they also happened because of negligence: yours."

"After the first seizure," Remus spoke up. "I was confident I could minimize the chances of it happening again. I didn't feel it wise to tell you about them when you were first waking up. You were exhausted and were already stressed out about the papers and what had happened. You couldn't even get out of bed yet." His eyes pleaded with Shadow to understand. "I didn't want you to
fear a seizure during every waking moment. It would be counterproductive to your recovery."

"I might even understand that," Shadow allowed, "but once I was out of bed and going about my normal routine, once Draco arrived - which put him in danger, by the way, since you had yet found a way to neutralize the risk of Demon emerging - you could have told me then. I was stronger and more able to deal with the situation. There was nothing stopping you."

"We should have told you," Severus cut off whatever Remus and Sirius were about to say. The two ex-Gryffindors looked over at him with exasperated expressions. "We have to be more careful. What happened at the Dursley's cannot be allowed to happen again."

"That sounds an awful lot like: 'I'm sorry; I won't do it again'," Shadow sneered. "Tell me, Severus, would you have accepted such an answer from a student over a mere botched potion? What makes you think I'll accept that response now, over something much more critical?" Severus tensed, but his calm had yet to break. The curly-haired teen turned his attention to the others. "Well?"

"We didn't know it was so dangerous," Sirius explained. "We thought seizures would only release Boy. We figured that the seizures were traumatizing and would always fall under Boy's category."

"We certainly didn't mean to endanger anyone here, nor did we want what happened at the Dursley's," Remus agreed.

"You didn't know." Shadow nodded. "Right, but it should have been considered. I should have been given the chance to consider these things. Are we even safe anymore? I assume Demon spilled a whole lot of dark magic around the area."

"Omi was able to clean up the residue. We strengthened the wards and protections around the house. It will take time to know if we were quick enough," Severus answered stiffly.

"You should have told me about my eyes," Shadow changed the subject abruptly. "There was no reason not to."

"Except you called yourself a freak the second you were aware of them," Severus countered, his eyes going sharp. "That was an indication that you needed to get used to them before we explained the cultural significance they have in the Wizarding world."

Shadow stood and looked down at them. "Look, I'm tired of hearing your excuses and reasoning. You all fucked up and people have died because of that mistake. The eyes were a smaller issue, yes, but it indicates a willingness to keep things from me, things like my medical condition. And that is the true problem. I realize that I'm technically a minor, that you all feel like you need to take care of me and make decisions for me, but you're wrong. I am in charge of myself. Not you, Remus. Or you, Sirius. Not even you, Severus. I thought we agreed on that?"

"That's not how it was, Harry…” Remus interrupted, getting to his feet to face him on even ground.

"That's exactly how it is," Shadow countered, glaring. "Don't deny it. You've said it yourself. You deemed me still too sick. You wanted to protect me. That can't go on. I'm telling you right now. If I can't trust you to be completely honest and upfront with me concerning my condition and recovery, I will have to find a new doctor."

Sirius glared, standing as well. "Now wait a minute."

"No!" Shadow yelled in their face. "I won't wait! This isn't negotiable. I am to be kept informed, and I am one hundred percent responsible for any decisions pertaining to my health and body. One hundred percent. That means no going to Sirius or Severus about results or possible treatments until
you talk to me first, Remus. Can you handle that or do I need to get a new doctor?" He crossed his arms and stared expectantly at the man across from him.

Remus looked around the room. Sirius was fuming and upset and Severus was still seated and completely blank. He wasn't going to get help from either of them. The tired werewolf looked back at the teen he had grown so close to. Could he separate his personal feelings and think of Shadow only as a patient? Really there was no other answer he could give. They couldn't afford another outsider being let in on Shadow's condition, mental or physical.

"I understand, and I can do that, yes."

"We'll see," Shadow said coldly. He looked at Sirius. "You're a good man. I need you on my side, but I can't trust you if you insist on treating me like a child. No matter what I look like, I am an adult in all but age."

"You're barely fifteen!" Sirius snapped. "You should - "

"Yes. I should be a child, but I'm not," Shadow interrupted firmly. "And I shouldn't have an evil demon living in my head. I shouldn't have been tortured all my childhood. My sanity shouldn't have been broken. I shouldn't have been forced to fight for my life ever since I stepped into the Wizarding world. I shouldn't have to plot murder. Or fear that I'll hurt my friends. Or take care of myself. Or deal with a war. But I do, and I am, and I have."

Shadow took an aggressive step forward, standing toe to toe with his godfather. "You can't change what I've been through. You can't protect me from the past or protect me from consequences in the future. All you can do is be my friend, watch my back, and support me. I'm sorry the world isn't as it should be, but that's how it is." He paused, watching the effects of his words play out on his godfather's face. "Stop treating me like a child. I can make my own decisions. Okay?"

Sirius ran his hands over his face and collapsed on the couch. "Yeah. I get it. Okay."

"Good. Glad that's finally clear." Last, he turned to Severus. The man didn't move or speak, but he was braced for whatever might be said. "Severus… God. I don't even know where to begin…"

This time it was he who sat heavily. "I feel betrayed. I've slowly learned I could trust you, and all that trust that I slowly learned to give you was meant for a time like this when I wasn't quite up to par to double check everything. But I trusted wrong. I feel like all my life I've been shown I couldn't depend on anyone and I stupidly didn't listen."

"Shadow…"

He shook his head. "No. Let me say this. When I woke up, I was frustrated and afraid. Remus and Sirius weren't telling me anything and then you came in and you laid everything on the table. I don't think you realize how much that surprised me, I didn't have to fight it out of you, you just told me without any effort on my part. I really, really appreciated that, but you're holding out on me again. I don't understand why."

After a short pause, Severus murmured, "Can you two excuse us, please?"

Remus and Sirius exchanged a look before standing. Sirius put a hand on his godson's shoulder as he passed and squeezed. Shadow watched them go. When the door shut firmly, he turned his head back around to meet his father's unreadable gaze.

"Do you recall agreeing to the adoption?" Severus asked evenly.

Shadow glared. "Do you recall agreeing that nothing would change in our personal lives? That I
would still be independent?"

"I do remember that," Severus answered calmly. He wasn't Head of Slytherin for nothing. He could be patient.

"What's your point, because I think mine is clear," the teen sneered.

"My point is this. You were upset by the idea that I offered the adoption out of a sense of obligation. I believe you said, 'I thought it was because you wanted me as your son as much as you wanted to help me.' In fact, I believe you would have refused the adoption if I did not care for you."

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asked stiffly.

Severus folded his hands in front of his mouth as he regarded his son solemnly. "It has everything to do with the topic at hand. You seem to be under the impression that I can turn my concern for you off and on. I was not here during your first seizure. I was not aware of them until the day of the adoption ritual when Lupin approached me in concern. He feared the ritual would provoke another one. I looked at his report and deemed the likelihood of a seizure happening due to the ritual slight.

"I considered telling you then, but if you recall you were already high-strung with nerves. So I decided to keep it to myself. I was going to tell you as soon as possible after the ritual, but you slept for days and then ran off because you were distressed about your eyes. Looking back, I realize I should have told you before the ritual. It was a mistake I won't repeat in the future.

"As for your eyes, I didn't mention their significance the moment I saw them because I was concerned about your reaction. I am aware of your sensitivity to being different. I wanted you to have a few days to come to terms with being my son before you had cause to regret it." Severus leaned back in the chair and met Shadow's eyes. "I hope you still know you can trust me."

Shadow said nothing. He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees as he scrubbed at his face. It did make him feel better knowing for how short a time Severus had kept his seizures secret, and if he were honest with himself, he did still trust in his mentor, but there was something just out of reach that made him still want to shy away from the man, so he changed the subject. "You made a potion that will help?"

Severus was aware of the evasion. After all, he was King at emotional avoidance, but he allowed the dodge for now. "I have. It will remain potent for four days. I'll give everyone a vial so that if another seizure occurs the potion will be administered immediately. That means you cannot go off anywhere alone. One of us five must be with you at all times. Including sharing your bedroom. An alarm will sound should you seizure in the night."

"I understand." Shadow nodded. "I don't like it, but I understand."

"So tell me… How are you feeling about the adoption?" Severus inquired. "We haven't had a session in a long time. I believe we are overdue."

"About that…" Shadow shifted in his seat uncomfortably. He realized that the conversation had slipped completely out of his control. He sighed. "I don't think I can continue like this. I mean, with you as my therapist. I don't think I can talk to you the same way now that you're my father."

Severus studied the teen and measured the honest discomfort he read in his body language and eyes. "I see. I would recommend against inviting another outsider into the intricate details of your condition and identity. They would have to know everything in order to help you. Keeping key information out of their hands will render them useless."
"I know that," Shadow snapped, annoyed.

"Surely you aren't suggesting you stop therapy," Severus sneered, making it clear how little he thought of that idea. "I was given to understand nothing would change between us, except you now have my name."

"Don't be daft, Severus. Things have changed," Shadow almost growled.

"I don't see why they should. I was your therapist long before I took up the title father. Do you think anything you say now will affect my relationship with you?"

"I don't know." The teen stood and began to pace around the room. "I don't know what to think about our relationship anymore. I trust you as much as ever, nothing has changed much, but… But at the same time I guess I expect for you to be a different person now that you're my father. I expect things between us to be different, but I don't know how."

"I understand." Severus nodded to himself. "You expect me to conform to your childhood ideal of a father: loving, protective, authoritative. Or you expect me to become like Vernon Dursley: abusive, oppressive, unreasonable. Maybe you fear a strange combination?"

"I don't know," Shadow repeated, coming to hover in front of the couch he usually took during sessions. "I really don't."

"You need to figure it out," Severus suggested gently. "Have you written in your journal since the Third-task?"

Shadow sighed and sat down. "No."

"You need to do so." Severus sat forward and stared intently at his charge. "Listen to me. This is important. I came to know you through these sessions. My expertise and experience has granted me the ability to facilitate your healing. It is in this capacity that I can most help you as your father. My position beside you is fixed. Nothing said in this room will change that. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Shadow muttered, feeling irritable and tired.

"Good." Severus leaned back and allowed himself to relax. "I want you to spend at least two hours writing in your journal and another hour on your piano."

Shadow nodded and left the room. The conversation hadn't gone as he'd thought it would. He felt no more in control than when he entered, but maybe Severus was right. Maybe things would become clearer in his own head if he took some time to write things down. Decided, he made his way to his room.

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Neville and Draco waited for Shadow. First Sirius and Remus came out. By their expressions Shadow's dressing-down had cut right to the bone. Neville bit his lip unhappily, but Draco had a slight smirk on his face. In his opinion, Shadow was completely in the right and the others should feel horrible about what they had kept from him.

As the minutes passed, Neville relaxed, but Draco grew more tense. He knew his Head of House. Maybe not in the same way Shadow did, but Draco knew enough that if the conversation was allowed to go on this long, Severus would eventually gain the upper hand. Each passing moment made it likely that his teacher was staging a counter-coup that would likely upset his friend. Finally, the doors opened. Shadow didn't look nearly as confident and satisfied as he should have, but he
didn't look pissed either. Draco silently applauded Severus and his control.

Neville hurried over to the slender teen worriedly. "What happened?" he asked softly, peering back into the parlor to make sure Severus wasn't coming out right on Shadow's heels.

"It went well with the first two, but you know how Severus is. He turned everything around on me.” Shadow sighed and continued on to the stairs. Neville walked beside him and Draco trailed behind. Shadow paused halfway up the staircase and looked at his two friends. "Do you mind if I figure things out on my own for a bit? I need to think about some stuff."

"Sure.” Neville immediately backed off, flushing.

"You two will play nice?" Shadow asked with a quirk of his eyebrow and a half-smile.

"Please," Draco drawled disdainfully, crossing his arms and gazing coolly up at his friend. "I never play nice."

"At least don't maim each other," Shadow laughed, brushing a curl away from his blue eye.

"I suppose I can grant you that.” Draco smirked, very satisfied. He had gotten Shadow to laugh, which was more than Neville had been able to do.

"Good." The teen gave them one more look before turning and continuing up the stairs.

Neville watched the blond out of the corner of his eyes and, seeing he had Draco's attention, offered a nervous smile. Draco fought the eye roll he felt coming and went back toward the sitting room. The Gryffindor trailed behind him silently.

"Hey," Sirius said, looking up from pacing as the teens walked in. "How is he?"

"How do you think he is, Black?” Draco asked with a slight glare.

"He's fine. He's just going to think about things," Neville reassured, ignoring the cold stare Draco sent his way. He had no idea what he had done wrong now, but he wasn't going to let them worry unnecessarily. Shadow wouldn't want them to worry, either. At least, he didn't think so. Biting his lip, he fell silent.

"That's good.” Remus sighed. He was sitting in a chair, his arms hanging limply over the sides. He looked sixty years old instead of forty.

"Did you take your potion, Moony?” Sirius asked worriedly, just now noticing how ragged his best friend looked.

"Yes, Padfoot. I'm fine." The werewolf closed his eyes and lifted a heavy hand to rub at his forehead.

Sirius knew it was a lie, but he didn't call him on it. He just continued pacing. "I've got to get out of here. We've been cooped up in this house for too long. Some fresh air would do us some good. What do you say, boys? We could get Shadow and have a picnic or something. I bet things would look better by the light of day."

"We are already in the light of day,” Draco sneered, gesturing to the windows letting in the summer sunshine. "And you do recall the last time Shadow went outside, do you not?"

"But it was almost a month between seizures last time and Snape made that potion to help," the man
whined, practically begging the blond to relent.

"He's busy." Draco crossed his arms, unyielding.

"A picnic is a good idea, but maybe later," Neville offered, earning another glare from Draco.

"We'll run free tonight under the full moon," Remus offered the jittery man. Everything was starting to weigh on Sirius and it was showing. If a little freedom would help, Remus thought it was worth the risk.

Severus walked in carrying several small vials in his hands. He handed two out to each and they took them silently. "These are to be administered the moment Shadow begins to seizure. One of us must be near at hand at all times. The sooner he gets this in his system the better."

"It will be hard getting him to swallow," Remus murmured.

"That is why it is important someone get this into him while the seizure is relatively mild." Severus glared at the werewolf in annoyance. Surely that was self-evident. "However, if he cannot swallow, it will absorb through the oral skin, so at least make sure it stays in his mouth. It will not be as effective administered this way, so use both vials instead of one. Understood?"

There were nods around the room.

"Due to this need, Longbottom, you will stay in his room at night. There will be an alarm set and it will wake you. You must be quick."

"Me?" Neville gasped, wide-eyed. All he could think about were his failures during the first seizure.

"I agree. It might be better if I stay with Shadow," Draco said, eyeing the panicky Gryffindor.

"Whatever Shadow decides, I'm sure will be best. Neither of you will let him down," Severus drawled. His black eyes measured Neville and the Gryffindor swallowed hard, going pale.

"What is the life-expectancy of this potion? And have you named it?" Remus asked as he studied the vial in his hands.

"Anesthesia Draught, and it needs to be remade every four days."

"Anesthesia? It renders him unconscious? Will that even work during a seizure?" Remus frowned.

"This will, yes," Severus answered impatiently. He turned to the teens and sneered. "Shouldn't one of you be upstairs right now? I believe Shadow is alone."

The teens jumped and hurried from the room. Remus sat up straighter, knowing the Potions Master got the children out of the room for a reason. Sirius stilled and his blue eyes never lifted from Severus's face.

"The name isn't an accurate description of what the potion will do. In actuality, it induces a coma-like state. A variation of the Draught of Living Death," Severus answered calmly. "I will be explaining it in more detail to Shadow later, but I'd rather not tell the other boys just yet."

"I can see why," Remus exclaimed, getting to his feet. "A coma? Is that really necessary? Do you know how dangerous that is? What if Shadow doesn't wake up from it? Has this been tested at all?"

He raised the vial up, looking at it as if it were poison.

"I would not give it to my son were I not certain," Severus hissed.
"Who did you test it on?" Sirius demanded, he strode over into the Potion Master's personal space. "An innocent Muggle or two?"

"If you must know," Severus answered icily, drawing up to his full height and glaring down his nose. "Yes. I did test it on Muggles. I fine-tuned the formula after each test, then I apprehended two wizards in Knockturn Alley. I tested it on them, erased both their memories, and finished the potion. Then I tested it on myself." He turned his burning gaze on the werewolf. "I'm perfectly aware of the potential risk of forcing a coma on my son. I've done my best to mitigate those risks. Unfortunately, circumstances make those risks necessary. Unless you believe it is acceptable to have an uncontrollable Demon on the loose?"

"No, of course not," Remus said softly.

Sirius was shocked by his friend's acceptance. "Moony! He just admitted to testing this on - !"

"What else was he to do, Sirius?" Remus interrupted angrily. "Shadow needs this potion."

"Was anyone hurt before you fine-tuned it?" Sirius snarled, whirling to face Snape again, too hurt by Remus to respond to him.

"No one was killed," Severus stated, neatly avoiding the real question. He turned his back on the other two men and began to leave.

"Are you going to tell Shadow what you've done?" Sirius flung out almost desperately. "When he finds out, what kind of example do you think you are setting for him, Snape?"

Severus faced his old enemy and Sirius flinched from the cold threat in the dark eyes. "Do you really think my son needs to know that he is indirectly responsible for even more suffering? Are you really so petty as to tell him such a thing just to get at me?"

Sirius said nothing, wondering how things had ended up so twisted. There was Remus, the one man whose ethics couldn't be bent even for a prank, but he wasn't batting an eye at this. Nor was he coming to Sirius's defense as he normally would. Severus left without another word and Sirius fell onto a couch and put his head in his hands. He was so confused.

"Come on, Paddy," Remus said softly, his eyes sad. "Why don't we go find a safe place to spend the night during the change. We'll come back tomorrow. Maybe we could even stop by a town or something and pick things up for the boys."

Sirius nodded and forced a smile. "Sounds great. Let's go."

"Pack a few things for us?" Remus asked, following behind him. "I need to talk to Neville before we leave."

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Neville followed behind his mentor feeling tired. It wasn't one in the afternoon yet, but he felt completely worn down and, mostly, it was Draco's fault. The blond Slytherin scrutinized everything he did and found Neville lacking. It was exhausting, really.

"Here we are," Remus interrupted his thoughts.

"Where?" Neville asked. They were in the woods and, looking around, he still couldn't see a reason to be out here.
"This is the clearing you used to connect to your Earth magic," Remus explained, watching the teen carefully.

"That can't be right," Neville frowned and looked around more closely. "This isn't even a clearing. A tree's in the..."

"An oak tree," Remus finished the observation.

That didn't make sense, Neville thought. He approached the tree and touched it, briefly closing his eyes. The young oak was strong, healthy. It was a tree with no sense of magic about it, but... Trees always had a sense of time about them. They were witnesses to a lot of it, but Neville couldn't sense the patient memories that it should possess. It was as if...

"That's impossible," he whispered faintly.

"What's impossible?" Remus asked. "Because from where I'm standing, I don't even have an explanation to feel disbelief about."

"I was... I opened my magic and let it take me away..." Neville spoke, still walking around the tree and touching along it's trunk. "For the first time, I was without fear because I couldn't afford to be afraid. Harry needed me... Then I found him and it was like... Like I grew out of the ground, like the roots of a tree absorbed me up and into it's body... That's when I realized I was a tree and reversed the Animagus Transfiguration."

"You left an oak tree standing here and took the place of another tree where you wanted to be. It's like Apperation," Remus said faintly as realization dawned.

"Is that possible?" Neville gaped at his teacher. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but I think you should owl Madigan. She is the Earth magic specialist." Remus shook his head and drew the still shocked teen into a half embrace. "Don't be so surprised. You have very special magic, Nev. I'm sure you are capable of amazing feats. This is just the beginning, I bet."

"Merlin," Neville groaned miserably. "I think I'm beginning to understand Harry's aversion to being different."

Remus laughed. "I understood that long ago." He ruffled the Gryffindor's hair. "And you need to start calling him Shadow. You can't slip up like that in public or at school."

Neville nodded solemnly. "I didn't even realize I was doing it. It's just hard. I've thought of him as Harry for so long. You'd think with how different he looks it would be easy, but... It's not. He's still Harry to me."

"Me, too." Remus smiled. "And in our own way, I think that means we love him the same and don't see him differently after all that's happened. It's a good thing, but he's really happy to get this new start and we don't want to mess that up on accident."

"Of course not," Neville agreed fervently. "I'll call him Shadow from now on."

"Try thinking of him as Shadow, too. It'll help," Remus advised. "Come on. We should get back. Sirius is probably gnawing on the furniture by now."

Neville laughed and allowed himself to be led back to the house. He felt lighter and more energetic than before. Maybe he was looking at the thing with Draco all wrong. Maybe all he should care about was Har... Shadow's point of view. The Slytherin would come around eventually, and if he
didn't, then that wasn't Neville's problem. He wasn't going to fade away and step back. Not unless he heard Shadow tell him to leave, and he hadn't heard anything of the sort.

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After almost two hours of writing in his journal, then another hour of playing the piano, and then another of taking a nap, Shadow felt rather invigorated and light. Throughout this time, Draco sat silently nearby in companionable silence reading books on becoming an Animagus and Neville read books on Herbology.

Shadow had been busy focusing on himself, but not so focused that he missed Draco's hard stares and territorial posturing or Neville's flushed and patient determination not to budge. The curly-haired teen smiled, his blue and green eye taking up a rare playful sparkle as he transformed into his lynx form.

Draco looked up from the book he was reading at the desk and narrowed his eyes. "Show off."

Shadow pinned his ears back and hissed, knowing his friends wouldn't know he was joking.

"He's not showing off," Neville predictably defended his brother. "His body is saturated with magic and the Animagus transformation uses some of that excess, relieving his body of stress and helping his body transition from magical back to completely organic."

"He's also a Slytherin who enjoys displaying his superiority," Draco sneered. "I'm not a complete idiot, unlike some."

Shadow flicked his tail, this was going to be fun. While Neville merely stared unhappily at the blond and Draco was busy gloating over his verbal dig, the cat silently slipped from the bed and hid under it. Then he began a low, pathetic mew.

"What's that?" Draco demanded, getting to his feet.

"I don't know." Neville dropped to the ground to get a look. "Maybe he's sick or something. We should get Snape."

Shadow hissed at that, then continued his weak cries.

"That was a no, I take it," Draco drawled, but his calm demeanor was gone and worry tightened his features. "Come out from under there, Shadow. It's not like you're a real cat."

"He looks awful." Neville frowned. "Get the professor."

Shadow hissed at that, then continued his weak cries.

"That was a no, I take it," Draco drawled, but his calm demeanor was gone and worry tightened his features. "Come out from under there, Shadow. It's not like you're a real cat."

"He looks awful." Neville frowned. "Get the professor."

When no immediate hiss resulted, Draco moved for the door. Shadow sprung. He bolted from under the bed, making Neville scream in surprise, and jumped over the teen’s back to fling his weight at Draco’s knees. The blond cried out and fell, landing right on the chubby Gryffindor.

Shadow used his thirty plus pounds to pin Draco. Licking his lips, he purred as he watched shock bleed into embarrassment into rage on his friend's face. He couldn't see Neville's face, but the sound of his wheezing was music to his ears.

Growling, Draco reached up and dug his fingers into warm, soft fur, shoving the lynx off his chest. "I'm going to skin you for that."

Shadow gave a saucy flick of his tail and ran out the door the blond had so nicely opened for him.
Draco chased after him, his wand brandished, and his eyes a cold silver. The lynx bound down the stairs. Had he a human face, he would have been grinning. A spell slashed through the air, but he felt it coming and neatly sidestepped. Then he was sliding on the marble foyer and skidding until he got traction and raced for the sitting room. Much more furniture there to hide behind.

Draco strode into the room almost twenty seconds behind him and looked around. His soon-to-be-hairless friend was no where to be seen. Casting a string of spells - the first putting a barrier up over the doorway so Shadow couldn't escape, the second making every living thing in the room except the castor blind, the third a Silencing Charm on himself - he moved slowly forward.

Shadow felt his sense of smell and hearing sharpen as he eyes became blind. His heart rate picked up from the challenge and he crouched, his shoulders rolling to keep his muscles loose and silent for when he pounced. The smell of Draco got stronger and he crawled over and behind. When he was certain nothing stood in his way, he leapt with a mighty wildcat scream.

Draco spun, heart in his throat as the silence of the room was torn with that deafening cry. Instincts overrode training and he spun with wild terror, completely frozen and unable to utter a single defensive spell. The cat slammed into his chest, the deadly claws scraping down his shirt and tearing it, but not the skin under it.

Draco fell back, infuriated, and growled a charm that would drench the cat in cold water.

Shadow yelped and scrambled away, hissing.

The blond sat up. He was intending to be furious, but when he caught sight of the tawny cat, soaking wet, ears pinned tight to his skull, he could only laugh. Shadow hissed again and rumbled a growl as he shook himself, flinging water everywhere.

"Are you done playing like children?" Severus drawled from the doorway. With a single flick of his wand, Draco's barrier had disintegrated.

"Yes, sir," Draco answered with a smug smile. "I think we are."

Shadow morphed into his human form, still very wet. He scowled at the blond as he began to cast drying charms. "Was that necessary?"

"What do you think?" the blond sneered, gesturing to his shredded shirt.

The brunet smiled at the damage, making Draco narrow his eyes with renewed anger.

"Enough. It's time for dinner," Severus drawled, but his dark eyes shone with mirth.

"What was all that about," Draco asked as the followed their teacher.

"I thought you and Nev could stand to lighten up a bit," Shadow answered absently.

The blond looked away and completely dropped the subject as they took their place around the dinner table. Shadow was content with that for now, but soon he'd force his brother and his best-friend to forge at least a tolerance for one another. He knew the problem lay with Draco, so he'd work on the Slytherin until he cracked. This was just the beginning.

Chapter end.
Trouble Comes Home to Roost

Trouble Comes Home to Roost

Burning heat throbbed through Shadow’s body; he laid back, sweating and languid. Warm hands slid up his thighs, warm and leaving goosebumps. They caressed his twitching stomach, slid over his chest, and kneaded his shoulders. Shadow arched into the touch, warmth pooling in his groin, pleasure radiating from his core. A moan, slow and sensual, resonated from deep in his chest, the sound low and rough, a counterpart to his breathy pants. Long fingers tweaked his nipples and he cried out, grasping at the desk underneath him. The heat was spiraling higher, burning him.

"God, yes… just like that…" he gasped, sitting up and reaching for more.

He saw a flash of dewy pale skin and tousled blond hair before a hot, sucking mouth crashed into his and he closed his eyes in pure bliss. He thrust his hips forward and met smooth sweaty skin. He growled and let their tongues battle; sparks of hot electricity shot through every nerve in his body. Slick and wet, tongues gliding - hands tugging at each other’s hair - sweaty friction against his cock, burning higher, faster - can't breathe, wanting to scream with the pleasure-

"…so beautiful…" a voice groaned in his ear before teeth nipped at his neck.

...

Shadow came hard, eyes flinging open with a strangled gasp. His comforter was half falling off the bed and his sheets were tangled around his sweaty limbs. The smell of his release was musky and salty in his mouth and nose. Instantly horror and embarrassment crashed over him like icy water. His eyes darted to the second bed that had been added to his room and he almost whimpered in relief to see Neville still soundly asleep.

"Fuck," he hissed. He flung the sheets away from him with violent force and quickly cast cleaning spells on himself. Nausea rolled in his stomach and he curled around his knees.

Fuck Lockhart. Shadow wasn't going to let that disgusting man scar him for life. It was just a fucking wet dream. Shadow wasn't so completely out of it. He knew the boys in his dorm had been having them for years. Everyone just pretended not to notice. Of course, he hadn't ever had one. The idea of sex made him want to throw up, but it had to happen at some point, right? It was fucking normal - the absolute pleasure, the absolute abandon… Lockhart's hands, his blond hair, his obscene mouth…

Shadow groaned and rolled out of the bed. He bolted for the bathroom. He just made it before he started retching. He threw up violently again and again, but he couldn't get the smell of Lockhart’s cum out of his memory. The horrible sounds of his dry-heaves turned into half-smothered sobs. He clung to the cool porcelain. Tears that felt like they were cutting his skin fell down his sweaty cheeks.

God, it had happened three years ago! It was no big deal anymore! Sex felt good; nothing was wrong with that or with the fact that his body's hormones had made him have a wet dream. He was a bloody teenage boy. Sex is normal, natural… The chant wasn't working. He hated the pleasure, hated his body's response. He didn't want to feel it. He didn't want to dream like that. It was unnecessary. Sex was unnecessary. He wanted to banish it from his life forever!
"Harry?"

Shadow gasped and lifted his head. Neville stood in the doorway looking worried and sleepy. Shadow fought to control his breathing, to stop the tears, the trembling, hide the pain and terror and hatred, but he couldn't move, couldn't speak.

"Hey," his brother said softly, soothingly. He came forward and crouched down. "Hey, it's okay."

Shadow shook his head hard, the curls plastered to his forehead not moving an inch. Neville stood and wet a washcloth. The cool damp on Shadow’s cheeks made him want to break down more. He wrapped his arms around his chest and let Neville wipe away the cold sweat. He was just glad his brother didn't speak or ask questions. He couldn't talk. He could hardly think.

Eventually, Shadow could breathe normally again and his tears dried up. He still felt shaken, but he didn't feel like he’d been shattered into a hundred pieces, either. He was still such a fucking mess. He laughed bitterly and Neville smiled in perfect understanding. Neville didn't know what had driven Harry from bed in such a state, but he knew the feeling. He had woken up like this a million times in the past.

Shadow stood and dropped the damp cloth in the sink. "Come on," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "We still have an hour before dawn. We should go back to bed."

"All right," Neville agreed.

He knew he wouldn't get anywhere by pushing. Especially since the dream was so fresh. So he just smiled and reached out to give Harry a one-armed hug that was barely tolerated. He'd let things pass in silence for now, but Neville would be watching. He'd wait for a moment where he could help his brother, the way Harry had helped him.

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True morning came and the three teens found their way to the dining room. Sirius was back and was sitting at the table with Severus. Remus was missing. Sirius explained that Remus was in their room resting, but that he was going to recover just like he had the many full moons in the past.

"I think it's about time you opened your presents, Harry." Sirius grinned as Omi cleared the last of the plates away.

"Shadow…" Neville corrected. He remembered calling his brother Harry earlier when he woke from the nightmare and was kicking himself for it now. He had to start using the name that his brother had willingly took. Even if he was still Harry to him.

"Shadow, then." Sirius shrugged. He felt more alive this morning than he had in a while. He really hated being cooped up. The serious faces around him needed to be banished, so he grinned and strode from the room, taunting the boys into following him.

Severus sneered but followed silently.

Sirius took that as a victory and grinned all the harder. "Well, well, well… What do we have here?" He looked over at the table that had been brought to the parlor. Presents of all shapes and sizes, a good dozen, were displayed in bright and vibrant paper. "Not bad, not bad," he muttered, pretending to pick over the pile. He turned to face his godson who was standing nearby with Neville. Draco and Severus had already taken seats. "Maybe there should be a penalty for opening them late. Four presents confiscated ought to do. One for every day."
Shadow put on a concerned expression. "If you need to take back whatever you got me, all you had to do was ask."

"Shut up," Sirius said with a laugh and draped an arm across his shoulders. "So what do you want to open first?"

"Shouldn't we wait for Remus?" Neville asked.

"How can you hesitate when all that loot is sitting right in front of you?" Sirius exclaimed, flinging himself at the teen and shaking him hard by the shoulders. "Look alive, man! There be gifts to plunder!"

"Don't break him, Siri," Remus said with a soft smile as he limped into the room. He looked pale and weak. Gashes on his face and arms were just barely clotted. "I'm kind of fond of the boy."

"Sir! Shouldn't you be in bed?" Neville exclaimed, rushing over to him.

"Merlin's beard, how much longer will this go on?" Draco groaned. "Just get it over with already."

Shadow lifted an eyebrow. "Anxious, are we? Shall I open your's first?"

Draco's eyes glinted and he quirked his lips into a secretive smile. "My gift to you isn't on the table, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" Shadow came over and began looking at the tags on the boxes. "And why not?"

"The best comes last," the blond answered with a laugh. He was in very high spirits.

"We'll see." Shadow grinned and snatched the box labeled to him from Neville. He tore the paper and carefully lifted the lid. "It's wonderful, Nev!"

It was one of Neville's sketches and depicted the Pitch at Hogwarts. There was no one on the field, no Bludgers or Snitches. Just the goal posts with the forest and lake in the back ground. Shadow could feel the stillness of the picture and the sense of peace. He set it carefully aside, already thinking of where to hang it in his room. He smiled over at his brother, hoping he understood how much the gift meant to him. He hadn't had time to personalize his bedroom yet and things like this made it all the more his. It was a wonderful feeling.

Neville smiled, very pleased. "You're welcome."

"You next!" Sirius crowed and threw a box at the clumsy boy.

Neville caught it and gasped. He hadn't dropped it! Shadow and Remus laughed. The gift was from Sirius and contained expensive gardening tools. "Thank you!" the chubby teen exclaimed and hugged the man.

He also got a book from Severus about defensive shields and a small box of Basilisk scales from Shadow. They would be invaluable for research and other such things. Draco, of course, hadn't gotten Neville anything, but Omi bought him a state-of-the-art, magical toad aquarium.

"Maybe if Neville sir's toad liked his home better, he not be running away so much!" the elf explained.

"Thank you, Omi." Neville smiled and hugged the little creature, much to Draco's disgust.

"And here is my gift. I'm afraid it's for both you and Shadow. You'll have to share," Remus said and
Shadow smiled to show he didn't mind sharing and they opened the gift together. It was an old photo album of the years their parents had gone to Hogwarts. There were pictures of the Marauders, people they didn't recognize, some of Severus, but what caught their attention were the pictures of Alice and Lily.

"Thank you," they said together, voices thick with emotion.

"You're welcome." Remus pulled them both in for a gentle hug. "So what else did you get, Shadow?"

Shadow opened a box full of cat toys and catnip as well as a new leather jacket from Sirius. Omi had gotten him a book on wandless magic. All eyes turned expectantly to the Potion Master. Severus stood and walked over to his son. Shadow let him take his hand and lift it so that the platinum portkey ring was between them. Severus lifted his wand, his dark eyes calm and watchful as he tapped the tip on the band of metal that had saved Shadow more than once. He whispered a string of Latin. Letters slowly etched themselves across the band in perfect calligraphy: SHLS.

Shadow smiled. "Shadow Harold Lilium Snape." He looked up at his father and nodded his head. He understood the gift and it wasn't his ring. His gift was Severus's commitment to be his mentor and father. It was the most precious thing he had ever been given.

Severus nodded and pulled a small, leather-bound book from his pocket. "This is a history of the family blood you now possess. My mother was a powerful pureblooded witch named Eileen Prince. My father, Tobias Snape, was a rich and powerful Muggle man who inherited a manor that has been passed down the Snape family for years."

"Thank you," Shadow answered respectfully. He carefully took the book and placed it next to him. Felling the weight of everyone's stares, he turned to Draco. "I believe you're next."

Draco didn't move, but Shadow's empathy showed him the blond was bracing himself for something. "I'll give it to you later."


"There are other things to open in any case," Severus drawled and sat back down. "There are several letters addressed to Harry, I believe."

Shadow nodded and took the envelopes. The first was from Hermione.

Monday, July 16, 1995

Dear Harry,

I so hope this letter reaches you and that you are well. We are so worried, but we hold out hope that you are safe and have just gone off with Padfoot. There is so much to say. I don't know if you've read the Wizarding papers lately, but everything is chaos. The Ministry is claiming Professor Snape is a liar and that You-Know-Who has not returned. Minister Fudge was furious when Professor Snape slipped away a week ago and would have declared him an outlaw had Headmistress McGonagall and Dumbledore's Will not intervened.

Dumbledore is being hailed a martyr and his words carry much weight with the world right now. In his Will, he testified that the professor has long been a spy for the Light. Headmistress McGonagall has officially laid the blame for Dumbledore's death and your disappearance, as well as the return
of You-Know-Who, on Crouch Jr. and Headmaster Karkaroff, neither of whom can be found.

Everyone was very frightened at first, but that is dying down now. The world in general believes that Professor Snape was mistaken and only saw Death Eaters and not You-Know-Who that night. They believe Headmaster Karkaroff and Crouch Jr. were working alone to assassinate Dumbledore to create panic and fear. The Ministry is being torn to shreds every day that goes by and the investigation of their whereabouts goes no further. This in turn makes the Ministry more determined to pin the blame on Professor Snape whom they can contact and find. But if they act against him without definite proof, the world will go mad because it would go against the Will of the Greatest Light Wizard in centuries, and his chosen successor, Headmistress McGonagall.

But not everyone is deluded, Harry. You don’t have to be alone. Headmistress McGonagall has gathered together people who believe Professor Snape and are willing to do all they can to stop You-Know-Who. If you are with Padfoot, tell him the old crowd is gathering. He'll know what that means. The Weasleys and I are just a few of the people who are going to stand and fight both the Ministry and You-Know-Who.

I love you, Harry. Please reply if you get this. There is so much I want to tell you. There is so much I want to apologize for. I should have stood by you. I realize now that Dumbledore was just a man, capable of fault. The old crowd has discovered a few of these faults. None of them pertain to you - and Ron and I haven't said anything about how Dumbledore harmed you. I will not add to my guilt by sharing things you wouldn't wish to be shared.

Yes, Dumbledore did great good, but it is foolish to believe he wasn't also capable of wrongdoing. I look around me at all the people who are pretending like Dumbledore was the greatest person to ever live, they practically worship him now, and I see a reflection of the blind faith I once had. The man was great. There is no denying that. But I believe you, Harry, that he hurt you. He was human and I was wrong.

I don't want to write more about that. I want to tell you in person. Whatever you need, I am with you. So are Ron and the twins. Your birthday is in two weeks. Hopefully you get this letter by then and are celebrating as much as you can. You deserve a little happiness. Be safe, Harry. Write back soon. I think I'm about ready to try the Animagus Transformation. And the boys are all ready to start making the Animagus Revealing Potion. We'd love for you to be here and to help us. We miss you.

With Love,

Hermione

Shadow was shocked by all the information in the long letter. He'd been so focused on healing and the adoption that he’d completely forgotten about the outside world. Not since he had first woken up had he even glanced at the *Daily Prophet*. That was going to have to change immediately. He handed over the letter to Severus to read and quickly tore into the next one.

July 18

Hey, mate!

You won't believe what's been going on. We're taking turns writing you since we're in the old crowd's HQ. Only one owl a day is allowed out and yesterday McGonagall sent one. Finally it's my turn. Mione won the coin toss or I'd have been first!

Well, the first thing I think I should tell you is that we're worried! Let us know you're okay. McGonagall seems pretty confident that you're alive and well. She keeps telling us to be patient. The
twins have developed a new product that sometimes lets us overhear a few things and from what we've gathered Dumbledore left McGonagall a lot of stuff and she seems to know a lot about the war and other things. I do know one of the things she found out is a prophecy, but we don't know what it says or what it's about. Mione guesses it's about you and You-Know-Who. Don't know much more than that.

Percy has turned his back on us. He got promoted to Junior Assistant to Minister Fudge even though he went through a tough inquiry about Crouch Sr. since he was the only one in contact with him. He came home all puffed up more than usual, thought we'd be proud, but Dad blew a gasket. Fudge has been doing all he can to make it seem like You-Know-Who isn't back. If he had his way, Snape would be in prison and everything would be done with, crisis over. Dad won't support that and he was mad Percy would. But you know Percy. He's a toad and all he cares about is being put in charge, so he said we were fools and stormed out, saying he'd never come back until we came to our senses and took a Death Eater's words with a grain of salt.

Mum won't stop crying. It's so bad that Bill and Charlie have come home to help Mum as well as join the old crowd. Bill's left Egypt and applied for a desk job at Gringotts. He says he's too busy to miss the tombs, but I think it has more to do with - You'll never guess! - Fleur Delacour. She's got a job there, too. So she can eemprove 'er Eeenglish. Bill's been giving her lots of lessons! Who can blame him really? I'd love a chance to teach her English. Especially since Hermione turned me down. Yeah. I finally got the guts to ask her. Just like you told me to at the Christmas Ball, remember? And she said she was sorry, but she's going with Krum and they're pretty serious. Can you believe it?

Anyway, there's going to be a lot of changes at school next year. We heard McGonagall talking about it. - By the way, can you believe McGonagall is going to be Headmistress? Gryffindor will win the Cup for sure! - Well, we've heard her say there will be three new teachers!

I don't know if I've ever written a letter this long before. My hand's cramping! One last thing, I guess. The twins and I are ready to start making the Animagus Revealing Potion. Hermione said she'd help us, but she says we should wait for Snape when school starts. I could really use your help, too! I can't mess this up. So hurry and write back.

Your best-mate,

Ron

P.S. Hope you have a good birthday! I'll give you your present the next time I see you.

This letter was not as revealing about the world, but it did have more information about this "old crowd" and McGonagall. Again he passed the note on. Hermione's letter had already been handed off to Sirius and Remus who were reading it at the same time. Draco stood by them impatiently, obviously planning on reading it next. Shadow opened the last envelope.

Thursday, July 19th

Dear our dearest Harry,

We've been very anxious to write you, but felt generous enough to let the lesser mortals precede our correspondence. Of course, we've interrogated said mortals to know what has been said so that we do not bore you with repeated information. It's not like you can't simply pick up their letters if you forget anything.

What my annoyingly pompous twin is trying to say is that we plan on giving someone who is
likely cut off and hiding from the world all the juicy gossip you are missing. You'll need what we're about to tell you if you're ever going to plan your next move.

If I'm being pompous, then you, beloved Forge, are being melodramatic. I recommend a happy medium. What say you?

I say, fine by me. So without further ado. Here is what you need to know.

One: There are twenty known members in the old crowd. We’re pretty sure there are even more. Some members are new, some were in the old crowd during the First War with You-Know-Who. There are Aurors and even crooks, so there’s a wide range of abilities the group can draw on in the pursuit of stopping You-Know-Who.

Two: The main goals of the old crowd are to follow and keep tabs on known Death Eaters that wiggled out of their due punishments the first time around. We know a few names for sure. The little Intel we’ve been able to wrangle out of the old crowd is that it looks like the DE's are all dropping out of society and the public eye. They are communicating pretty frequently with each other, but no one else at the moment.

Two and a half: The old crowd fears that the DE's are planning something big, that You-Know-Who is gathering his army and that's why all's been quiet so far. Most of the world won't be prepared for this move because they are all believing the Ministry's tripe that Snape is delusional or in cahoots with the two wanted criminals who murdered Dumbledore.

Three: Fudge knows he doesn't have the capability to be Minister in a time of war, so he is doing everything and anything to keep the status quo. Be very careful going up against him or trying to spread the truth. He is very trigger happy at the moment. Snape is in serious danger of becoming a scapegoat as well.

Four: McGonagall has been studying prophecies as much as she can in her spare time. We haven't told the others this, but we overheard a conversation between the real Mad-Eye and McGonagall. It seems it is prophesized that you are the only one who can defeat You-Know-Who. Every other breathing person will come up short. We don't know the exact wording. Sorry.

Five: We passed our Apparation tests and now can Apparate correctly and at will.

That's all the best stuff we've got for you. I don't know if we'll be allowed to try and owl you again. McGonagall thinks that if you're in hiding then we could potentially put you in danger by writing. But maybe we can write if you write us first and show her it's okay.

Take care, Dearest Harry! We've got plans for you. Several joke shop wares need to be tested and we could use your help brainstorming. Help with the Animagus Revealing Potion wouldn't be amiss either. Gred and I just couldn't bear it if we screwed up and destroyed this one and only chance at finding the animal within!

Your sincere spies,

George and Fred

P.S. Have a very happy birthday! May you live to see sixteen!
Shadow grinned down at the letter. He was beginning to become quite fond of the twins. He passed the letter over to his father and just sat there quietly thinking and watching the expressions of those around him.

Severus was blank-faced, but his body language and the feeling shrouding him was of intense concentration and focus. He was most likely already plotting and planning something. Sirius and Remus looked grim. Draco was pale and blank-faced, but he was fuming and a tad afraid. Neville was more than just a tad afraid, but he was also determined and angry.

These were his closest allies; the people he counted on most to get him through this. Looking around, Shadow realized that he wasn't worried that they'd fail him. If anyone could help him beat the odds, it was them. They just had to be careful. Their next moves had to be perfect. Voldemort wasn't back, but the Death Eaters were, and he had to make sure Severus stayed just out of the Ministry's reach.

"What is this old crowd?" he finally asked.

"The Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore created it during the First War," Severus answered distractedly. He was still going through the twins’ letter.

"Should I not have done the Adoption Ritual?"

Surprisingly, it was Sirius who answered. "No. You made the right choice. You did your part and destroyed Voldemort." Draco and Neville both flinched at hearing the name. "Just as this prophecy Minerva has told her you would. They don't need you now for anything except as an icon and scapegoat."

"But you might want to consider telling a few people the truth," Remus added. His eyes flicked over to the letters around the room. "They care about you and would be very unhappy to think you died."

"Maybe," Shadow muttered. "Does anyone have the Daily Prophets I've missed?"

"I'll go out and get some," Sirius offered. When no one objected he made his way quickly from the room.

Shadow turned to Draco. "Did you know about any of this?"

"No." He shook his head once. "Lucius completely warded off the manor. Not even owl post could get in."

"I didn't know, either." Neville sighed. "The Herbology Institute is pretty isolated. They only care about the plants, not what's happening to the world. I came straight here once the program ended. I guess we've all been so caught up that we've forgotten everything that happened effects the world as well as us."

"We'll have to rectify that," Severus drawled. His dark eyes glinting. "We need more information. While Black is fetching newspapers, I'll check in with Minerva. Perhaps I can find out more details about the Order and Ministry."

"I'll stay with the boys," Remus offered. His own eyes were hard and golden. He looked beat to hell, but he was full of protective strength.

Severus inclined his head before striding from the room.

"You should get some rest, sir," Neville said softly, coming up to his mentor's side. "I promise we'll come get you if anything happens."
"It's not like we can't defend ourselves," Shadow pointed out.

Remus gave in. "All right. Help me to my room, Nev?"

"Of course," Neville agreed quickly. He helped Remus to his feet and allowed the man to lean on his shoulder.

Remus smiled affectionately. "You're going to be very tall one day. You're only a few inches short of my height as it is."

"I have a feeling it's going to get pretty crazy around here soon," Draco drawled, getting to his feet as Remus and Neville shuffled away. "Come with me. I want to give you my present before anything else happens."

Curious, Shadow followed the blond upstairs and to the guest room he had been given. Draco shut the door behind them and gestured for Shadow to sit at the desk. The brunet did as he was told and watched with his multi-colored eyes as Draco went to the closet and brought out a fist-sized box. The Slytherin opened it and took out a silver cup, which ended up being a Pensieve when Draco un-shrunk it.

"What's in it?" Shadow asked softly, never looking away from his friend.

"The night on the tower." Draco moved back and sat on the bed. His face was composed and his body was relaxed, but Shadow could feel the anticipation, nervousness, and something he couldn't quite identify, but it was deep and strong.

"Why?" he asked simply. He placed his hands on the rim in a gesture of acceptance and the blond relaxed ever so slightly.

"It's proof. That we're in this together as you've said. I'm not going to turn on you," Draco pledged loyally.

"I already knew that, Serpentine." Shadow smiled. "You don't have to show me this."

Draco tossed his head impatiently. "I want to."

Shadow nodded and lowered his head into the silvery liquid... *Draco slammed into the door that lead to the roof and cursed when he found it locked. He backed up and began every unlocking spell he knew. His father always told him he had a gift for unlocking things and dismantling wards. He could unravel spells that were cast by a wizard twice his strength, but this was the strongest one he had yet come across."

*He began using Dark spells, none of the Light ones working. Thankfully, the second Dark spell made the lock shatter. Draco slammed the door open and had to throw himself flat, a blood reversal hex speeding over his head. He winced. That was not a pretty way to die. He lifted his head and his eyes went wide.*

*Severus was on the ground, still shooting curses and hexes, but his left leg was torn and twisted, blood was pooling around him. Dumbledore was approaching slowly like grim death. He had a white spell-shield before him. Severus's curses ricocheted off it crazily. Dumbledore incanted something Draco had never heard before. Severus screamed, a hoarse grating sound, but he didn't lower his wand. Blood spilled from his eyes like tears and began to fall from his nose.*

*Panting, shaking, Draco raised his wand.*
"Forgive me, Severus. I have failed you," Dumbledore said sadly. "I thought I could guide you to the Light. I thought I could protect you from the Darkness. I was wrong." He lifted his wand level with the snarling man's eyes. "Go in peace, my boy."

"Release the bolt of Zeus!" Draco bellowed.

He stood, feet braced, his blonde hair whipping around his face, his eyes wide and bright with fear, his face pale, but the pink bolt of light struck from his steady wand and hit the headmaster squarely in the chest.

Dumbledore collapsed instantly. His wand flew from his hand as he began to convulse, choking noises rising from his mouth as his spittle began to foam over his lips. Draco watched, horrified, as the old man's eyes rolled violently in his head. Skin was striped from his hands and face as the headmaster scraped them roughly across the stone floor. Suddenly, the horrific view was cut off by black robes... And Shadow was released from the memory.

Shadow gathered his wits for a moment, just letting the images and impressions settle in his mind. It had been a horrific way to die, but it had been quick, which was much better than the fate Dumbledore had left him to. He wasn't sorry they made the poison, and he wasn't sorry he made sure the Headmaster ingested enough to kill him.

"Thank you," he said softly, lifting his eyes and meeting Draco's.

They stared at each other for a long moment. The fresh memory stood between them, linked them undeniably. Draco had cast his lot with Shadow's irrevocably; this was the concrete proof. He was refusing to be the dragon of bad faith he was named.

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Sirius returned with several weeks worth of Daily Prophets. They were filled with articles from the Ministry stating many resources were being solely directed into the search for Dumbledore's killer. There was even one article that all but implied Harry Potter was at his hidden summer home and safe. That was why the Wizarding world wasn't also screaming for the Ministry to produce their Boy-Who-Lived.

Despite the constant reassurance and hints of progress, the reporters were giving voice to increasingly demanding and impatient articles. They were growing tired of waiting. They wanted to see justice done quickly, so that they could feel safe in their beds. There were no reports or hints of Death Eater activity or mention of the Order of the Phoenix.

Except for one.

In the August 1st edition of the Daily Prophet, a Muggle home in Surrey was reported to have the Dark Mark blazing overhead. Two victims were found and the Ministry was being very tightlipped about what kind of condition the bodies were left in or the possible reasons that those particular Muggles had been targeted. The Ministry was scrambling to bring order and restore faith. They weren't very successful so far.

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Shadow walked along a dark corridor. The ground seemed to be stone or marble, a dark grey. Everything was in shades of black. The walls, the arched ceiling. The corridor was long and windowless. The only door lay at the end and Shadow walked toward it with a feeling of great anticipation and greedy lust. He wanted what was behind that door with a fierce desperation. He
needed it, wanted it, had to have it.

The sound of bare feet slapping softly at the floor followed him as he got closer and closer to his goal. The door was concrete and had heavy black chains and locks all over it, but that didn't stop him from feeling what was on the other side. God! The power! The Hate and raw Rage. It shimmered in front of the door like heat waves in summer. He could tasted it and wanted so bad to just reach out and tear that door open and let all that sweet glorious power run through him freely. Make it his, let it possess him, and he could finally have the world.

Cold, chilling laughter sounded from behind the door. It was Hungry, and it wanted Out. It wanted the door to be torn open. Wanted to shred and maim anyone stupid enough to free it. Then it would move on to bigger and better targets. A sliver a fear bubbled up under the anticipation and Shadow knew he wasn't ready to open that door. But soon. Soon he would and Demon would be set loose on the world.

…

Shadow sat up with a gasp. He was covered in sweat and shaking with denial. No! No, he didn't want to free Demon. He didn't! He didn't want the carnage that resulted, but he still feel the greedy, excited pulse twisting around inside him.

No.

He flung his covers aside and made his way to the music room. He needed to clear his thoughts, needed to shake the nightmare from his mind. It wasn't true. It wasn't! He tried to drown it all out with the piano's voice.

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He hardly recognized her. Her long face was tight and new wrinkles bracketed her mouth and eyes and lined her forehead. Her hair was still up in a tight bun, but no longer was it merely streaked with gray. The brown was losing the battle desperately. It wouldn't be much longer before her hair was completely silver. She looked older, tired, but there was an intensity about her. Her eyes were sharper. It was as if the woman who all her long life only saw right and wrong, black and white, now saw the world in shades of grey. The last of her innocence had shattered and left her smarter and slightly bitter.

She sat behind a desk in a study in 12 Grimmauld Place. Ironically, the house the Order was making their headquarters out of was the Mutt's childhood home. Black didn't know, of course, but it wasn't like he could object. He was still an outlaw running from the Ministry.

The place was dark. The windows were small and/or covered. The furniture was dark mahogany or black. Wallpaper, carpet, rugs, all of it was in dark shades. Dust and grim coated almost everything, and magical pests hid in almost every crook and corner. The air was thick with the stale malevolence of its previous owners. It wasn't exactly a place you would call home.

The Order had been cleaning it for at least a month. He shuddered to think what it looked like before now because it was still oppressive. Six months ago he would never have imagined Minerva, a Witch of Light, in a place like this. Extended exposure to the house was probably part of the reason why she looked so haggard and wide-eyed.

"I've been trying to reach you," she said and gestured to the chair across the desk.
"I've had personal commitments," Severus answered softly before taking the seat.

"You missed Albus's funeral. We had it on school grounds. Most of the student body attended, as well as his friends, colleagues, and those who just idolized him. There was a crowd winding all the way to Hogsmeade."

"I regret missing it," Severus offered, even though they both knew he was lying.

"I'm glad you are here now." Minerva set her hands on the desk, folding her fingers together.

Her hazel eyes never blinked or left the dark ones before her. It made Severus uncomfortable and uncertain. Had she changed her mind about his innocence?

"We need your strategic thinking, as well as insight into the Death Eater mindset. Not to mention Minister Fudge has been demanding we turn you over for further questioning."

Severus stared at her. What could he say to that? Was she calling him a Death Eater and threatening to hand him over unless he served her somehow? He had a flashback to the many conversations with Albus that went just like this. His hands went cold and his face tightened. He would not live like that again.

"They will ask you where you have been. Why you were out of contact. Where you were on the day Harry Potter's family was butchered."

"I had nothing to do with that, Minerva," he said quietly.

She stared at him a moment longer before sighing and leaning back into her chair. "I didn't believe you did. And if you had, I was certain you were only a witness." She sighed again and rubbed at her eyes. "To be honest, I was hoping it were the later. We could really use a firsthand report on the Death Eaters. More importantly, we need a way to discover if our Mr. Potter is being held captive by any of them."

Severus was confused. Her suddenly relaxed body language and her confiding tone threw him completely. "I'm sorry I have no information. I've been home recovering and planning."

"I figured as much. Still. I am glad you are here. Your strategic thinking will greatly aid us," she said and a tired smile touched her lips. "But before we get to that, what brings you here? Why have you come now and not earlier?"

"I need your advice," Severus admitted in a soft voice he knew would immediately catch her attention. Never in her presence had he ever acted so human. His cold, cruel, and bitter mask was completely absent as he let his face soften. Minerva wasn't his enemy. Not yet. If he could just secure her sympathy and support…

"What is wrong, Severus?" Minerva asked. She stared at her old colleague with wide, worried eyes. All her problems and all her fatigue melted in the face of this man's need.

When the Headmaster had died, she had been given his memoir as well as a catalogue of all the current plots and machinations he was involved in that would need to be continued. It had been a long accounting. Half of what he was involved in or had started appalled her. The top most of those being what Albus had Severus do for him, as if the man were a beast of burden and redemption the carrot to be dangled in front of his nose.

No one should be manipulated and controlled in such a manner. Especially not coerced into doing such horrible things. The things Severus had to witness and report on, all the while begging to be
released from his duty as a double agent under the most evil Dark Lord ever recorded… It was horrific! And he had just barely been twenty-one! In her way of thinking, Severus deserved a lot of credit he had never received. Minerva would do anything she could to right the wrongs Albus had done to him and the others, Harry Potter among them.

Severus was using slight Legemency and felt a vague outline of her thoughts, making him both relax and shift uncomfortably. He couldn't help it. Never had Minerva looked at him with such burning determination to help him. They were colleagues that led rival Houses. He knew her well and she him, but this was never part of their old relationship. He straightened his shoulders and forced his face blank. His son's future depended on his success with her. He couldn't allow himself to be flustered or turned away from his purpose.

"You are aware that I was married."

"I am. Not that we ever met her." Minerva's face went soft with compassion. "We didn't even know you had a daughter until after the… incident."

"You can say it," Severus said stiffly. "Until after my wife and daughter were murdered."

"I am sorry…" She cleared her throat, knowing he wouldn't want her sympathy. "Why do you bring this up?"

"I turned to Albus in April of 1980, eight months after I joined the Death Eaters," Severus began. "Then I immediately began spying for the Headmaster. It was… difficult."

"I can't even imagine," Minerva said softly, wishing she had the power to erase the haunted expression from Severus' face.

"I was on a raid in July. I did all I could to participate as little as I possible and to help the victims, but in this raid I was forced to rape a witch or be revealed as a traitor." Severus looked away from her face to hide his shame. Though he was making up the event he was about to describe, he had done worse in truth. "I did what I must. It was brutal, but I did not kill her. When I could, I returned with potions to heal her pain. I could hardly speak to her, I was so devastated by what I had done to her. I helped her back to her home, offered to owl for her friends or family. At first she was terrified of me, but by the time I left she was calmer."

"Oh, Severus…" Minerva whispered.

"It wasn't until November of 1981, over a year later, that I met that witch again. Her name was Amalia Ashton."

"Amalia!" She exclaimed, shocked.

"Yes." Severus smiled sadly. "The Law Witch who so valiantly fought to free me from Azkaban. She told me that she knew, even before it was revealed by Albus, that I was not really a Death Eater. She told me that it took a long time for her to forget what I had done. Both the rape and the care I showed her afterward. It confused her, but when I was confirmed a spy by Albus, she believed I was just as much a victim as she had been. When I protested, she told me that it wasn't wrong to care for me because only we could heal each other."

"Amalia was an incredible woman." Minerva smiled. She had only met the blue-eyed witch twice. Both times were before her marriage to Severus. Once the two were married, Amalia hardly ever made an appearance and Severus was gone from view almost as much to be with her. They had hid away from the world. But even still, Minerva remembered her smile.
"She was," Severus agreed with a deep bow of his head. He still missed her so much. It hurt to talk about her, but he knew she would approve the little lies he was seeding here. She would have adored Shadow and done anything for him. "I proposed to her two months after I was released from Azkaban. It was the best thing I could have done for myself, but I wish… I wish it hadn't cost her so much."

"Severus, I know she doesn't regret it. She loved you."

He made a dismissive gesture with his fingers and shook himself, as if getting back on point. "The night I proposed to her, she revealed a secret she had kept from me. She had a son. A son born February 24th, 1981."

Minerva gasped, already guessing where this was going.

Severus smiled at her. "Yes. It was my son as well. Conceived the night I raped her. At first, she couldn't tell me because the war was still ongoing and I was in the Death Eater camps. She had guesses, but no real proof that I was a spy. She wasn't willing to risk the child. After my release she didn't tell me because she was afraid it would shatter me. I was not well enough to handle such news after everything that had happened. She waited for me to regain my mind and sanity. So the night I proposed was the first night I met Shadow, just a few weeks past his first birthday."

"You never told anyone," Minerva murmured.

"I never told anyone about Tabitha either," Severus pointed out. "They were mine. We were happy together. I didn't want anyone to intrude on that. I wanted them separate from all the world. I would have stayed with them always if it weren't for Dumbledore insisting I join the Hogwarts staff."

"Your son - Shadow, wasn't it? - He wasn't there the day Amalia went to Diagon Alley." She was beginning to catch on and she was astounded.

"No. He was ill and sleeping in the care of my house elf. After Amalia and Tabitha died, I was more determined than ever to keep him safe from Death Eaters, so I made sure to erase all official notice of his existence. Not even the Ministry has documents."

Minerva stood and came around the desk. She looked down at the man who was staring at her so imploringly. Confessing to erasing all legal documentation for a citizen of the Wizarding world was a great crime. He was trusting her with something exceedingly precious. "What would you have me do?" she asked softly.

"Hogwarts has a certain independence from the Ministry. I can give you all the original documentation: Shadow's birth certificate, medical records, schooling records, all of it. Can you say you've had it this whole time and that he was under Hogwarts' protection? After the confrontation on the Astronomy Tower, the Death Eaters will be after me worse than ever before. I can protect him better if he's with me this year. I want to enroll him in Hogwarts."

"But you can't do that if he doesn't officially exist." Minerva understood, but she frowned. "Why didn't you do this from the beginning? Why didn't Hogwarts have your son's information when you removed his documentation from the Ministry?"

"I would've had to tell Albus and… I didn't trust him to grant my son protection. I didn't trust him not to use Shadow against me," Severus said lowly, meeting her eyes unflinchingly.

Minerva winced. Severus was right. Albus would not have hesitated when he saw one more hold he could have over his ex-spy to insure complete obedience. That decided her. Not only was Shadow
Severus's son, but the boy was also a victim of the headmaster's plots himself.

"I accept," she said firmly, returning to her seat. "Shadow Snape will be accepted into Hogwarts. I'm sure I'll find documentation from Albus stating that he was aware of and monitoring your son in the Ministry's stead. Of course, now that you want to enroll him officially in the school, you will have to return Shadow's documentation to the Ministry. You can do that during your interview."

Severus had been smiling, extremely gratified to learn Minerva was going to continue to support and shelter him and Shadow, but at the last he frowned sharply. "What interview?"

"I've been putting them off as long as I can, Severus," she answered just as sharply, her hazel eyes narrowing. "They will not be patient any longer. Two days ago I received a summons for you to go to the Ministry on August 12th. If you aren't there, they would put out a warrant for your arrest."

"And you were going to inform me of this when?" he spat, hands clenching on his armrests.

"I've been doing all I can to try and contact you, Severus!" She banged her hands on the desk and leaned forward across it. "You've disappeared from the face of the earth! I had hoped I'd see you before then. Luckily, my hope was not misplaced."

"I will be in contact henceforth," Severus said stiffly, acknowledging his fault in the matter.

"Damn right, you will," she glowered. "And when will I meet this son of yours? We will have to test him to make sure he is up to his peer’s level. He will be in Fourth Year, won't he?"

"Yes. He turned fourteen in February of this year."

"Well..." she smiled slyly. "Which House do you think he will be in? Gryffindor, perhaps?"

"Hardly," Severus sniffed and lifted his chin. "He is Slytherin, through and through."

"We shall see," Minerva laughed. She stood and gestured for Severus to precede her out of her room. "Why don't we go to the kitchen for a bite to eat? There is an Order meeting in an hour. It will be good to have you there. We need all the help we can get."

Severus bowed his head in acceptance and followed her out the door.

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Not everyone was thrilled to have Severus join the Order's ranks, but they were all loyal to Minerva and they tolerated his presence at her insistence. He let his eyes drift around the table. There was Mad-Eye Moody, Emmeline Vance, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, Arthur and Molly Weasley, Bill and Charlie Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt and his Auror Apprentice, Nymphadora Tonks, and finally there was Minerva and himself. The only Order members absent that he could name was the Lupin and Hagrid. That made fourteen, which meant there were at least six more agents in the Order, according to the twins' count, that he did not know. That would have to change.

He sat there for over an hour, just observing everyone. There were several reports on known Death Eaters' movements, or the lack thereof. Lucius Malfoy, Theodore Knott Sr., Rookwood, Crouch Jr., Karkaroff, Crabbe and Goyle Sr., and Parkinson were only a few names they had. Most all of them had prominent careers and had stopped going to work, stopped going to social functions. There were some suspicions that they had even dropped out of contact with their families.

Minerva had feared this meant they did have Harry in custody and were doing something evil with the boy, but that attack at the Dursleys gave her hope. She believed they made a raid and, in a fit of
rage over not finding Harry, they murdered Mr. and Mrs. Dursley. It was the only motive she could fathom. So the Order was now fairly confident that Harry had run off with Black once again.

Severus, of course, remained silent on this topic and could offer no guesses about the Death Eaters' behavior, though it did worry him, too. They were planning something. They would not give up their political power for no reason. Most of these men were not the type to run and hide.

Fudge was sweating bullets and threatening the Aurors for failing at capturing Crouch Jr. and Karkaroff. The Aurors were doing all they could, burdened also with having to solve Albus’s murder. Severus was going to have to walk very, very carefully when he answered his summons on the 12th.

Finally, the meeting was dismissed. Severus made his way from the room quickly before Minerva could capture him again. He walked down the hallways, ignoring the glares and suspicious glances of the other Order members. He climbed the staircase, being extra careful not to wake the sleeping portrait behind thick curtains, and found the bedrooms. He knocked on them until he got a response. Unfortunately it was the youngest male Weasley who answered.

"Professor Snape!" the redhead cried, shocked. Then his face turned excited. "Is Harry here?"

"No. I have no idea as to his whereabouts, Mr. Weasley," he said, leveling an icy stare at the teen that made Ron swallow hard. "I am here to inquire into Miss Granger's progress with her Animagus form. She should not attempt the final transformation without supervision."

"Y-y-yes," he stammered, flushing. "I mean, no, she hasn't tried yet. She's going to wait, but she is ready. A-a-and my brothers and me are ready to start making the potion. Hermione tested us and she thinks we're ready, too."

"And she is an authority on the subject, I'm sure," he drawled. When Ron squirmed under his cool gaze, he smirked. "In any case, I shall be returning in a few days. I will supervise her transformation and begin to assist you and your brothers with your potions. Please pass the message on."

"Yes, sir!" Ron cried, a grin splitting his face. This was bloody awesome!

Severus nodded and drifted back the way he came on silent feet.

Minerva caught Severus at the foot of the stairs and dragged him off to the study once more. There she gave him a necklace that would vibrate whenever she needed to contact him and grow warm three hours before meetings that he would be required to attend. If he couldn't make the meeting, he was obligated to inform her or another member as soon as possible. He agreed and accepted.

She also asked if he would like to bring his son to Grimmauld Place to stay before Hogwarts to give him a chance to interact with the teens already in residence. He answered that he would after he went to the Ministry. She nodded, satisfied. Finally, she informed him that the Order was in desperate need of healing, offensive, and defensive potions. Could he possibly brew a few before he left? He said he would and bowed his way out.

At least the potions lab was well stocked with rare ingredients and was so terrifying that no one would come near the place to bother him. Severus had a feeling that Minerva was going to be just as demanding as Albus, but she would not be near as invasive or controlling.

Chapter end
Draco woke early as he did most mornings. Usually he lay in bed thinking about the day ahead, but as soon as he heard the piano music coming from down the hall, he leapt from the bed and dressed hurriedly in slacks and his blue, long-sleeved, silk t-shirt. He ran his hand through his hair before quickly making his way to the music room.

Shadow sat behind his favored instrument with sweaty curls plastered to his forehead, still in his black pajamas. Draco knew he must have been at it for a while and stepped over with a worried frown. Shadow didn't move to acknowledge his presence, so the blond took a seat on the bench, leaving his questions unasked. His friend would speak when he was ready. It was killing him, but he would be patient.

Eventually, after only five minutes, Shadow sighed and allowed his fingers to still. The pounding notes faded into silence and he breathed heavily, just staring at the glistening keys. Draco sat silent. His worry and forced patience falling on Shadow like snow, just as cold and stinging.

"The Death Eaters need to be stopped," Shadow finally spoke, his voice surprisingly husky. "I will stop them, but…"

"But what?" Draco asked softly, turning his body so that he was facing his friend. His grey eyes steady on Shadow's face.

"I had a dream… I was dreaming of opening Demon's door. Of letting him go free to destroy everyone who hurt me. I didn't care at all about those who would be caught in the middle. In fact, it made me exhilarated to think of everyone fearing me."

Draco wasn't sure what to say to that, but he reached out to put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

Shadow bowed his head and wrapped his arms around his chest. His lips were tight and folded down at the corners. He forced the words past his constricted throat. "I want them stopped, even dead, but… Not like that… Demon… is a monster," he rasped, hunching his shoulders and hiding his face. "He'd kill and mutilate anyone who got in his way. Hell, he'd even destroy the Earth itself if he could. I don't want to free him. I don't! I wouldn't!"

"Hey," Draco murmured and pulled Shadow in with a one-armed hug. The brunet was so upset that he allowed it and leaned against Draco's side. "You would never free Demon. Not because you shouldn't, but because you don't need to. You're strong enough to stop the Death Eaters alone, but you also have me and Severus to help you. Demon is unnecessary."

Shadow turned to look at the blond with a scrunched brow. When he saw that Draco was utterly serious, his lips twitched. His blue and green eyes lightened as he cocked an eyebrow. "Of course. Forget that he's a monster and capable of mass destruction the likes of which no sane human can contemplate. That doesn't matter one bit. The point is that Demon's not necessary, which makes him a redundant second thought."

"Exactly," Draco nodded. "Not even worth worrying about, let alone freeing."

Shadow laughed. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Well, we can't all be perfect," the blond said with haughty arrogance.
"You're not scared of Demon at all?" Shadow asked incredulously. His eyes were narrowed and he reached up to brush his bangs out of his face, unconsciously revealing the pale jagged scar.

"Not really." Draco shrugged and turned to face the keys. He lifted a hand and pushed a few down. The notes filled the room. "He's powerful and terrifying, and I'd hate to be the Dursleys, but… He only comes out when you're broken. And I'm grateful for that. In any case, I don't plan on seeing you like that again. So… What's there to be scared of?"

Shadow had his attention fully on the blond and was shocked to discover Draco wasn't lying. He really wasn't scared. He was determined and matter-of-fact.

Draco glanced over and met his gaze and Shadow realized he had never seen eyes that color. A grey-silver, flinty almost, in the morning sunlight. The strength of Draco's promise to stand and fight beside him, fight for him, was clear in their depths, and that was a subtly different feeling from Severus who was determined to protect him by guarding and teaching him.

Shadow reached over and clasped Draco’s silk-clad shoulder. "Thanks, Serpentine."

Draco nodded with a smile, turning back to the keys. "So how does this work? Teach me something."

Shadow grinned and he began to show Draco how to play piano, feeling warm all the way through, feeling like maybe he could stand up and face the threats looming inside and out.

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Neville yawned and opened his door. The strange noise coming from down the hall had woken him and he went to go see what was going on. It sounded like the piano, but he'd never heard Shadow play such awful music in his life. Opening the door, he found his brother laughing with Draco sitting beside him. The Slytherin was the source of the limping tune as he tried to string together a melody.

"A little less laughing and more instruction would be nice," the blond growled.

Shadow grinned. "I thought you were perfect?"

"I'm perfectly displaying what an awful teacher you are," Draco snarked and finally gave up.

"What are you two doing?" Neville smiled, coming to stand beside Shadow. "I didn't know you wanted to learn, Draco."

"Yes, well..." The Slytherin shrugged and made his face a mask of indifference, hiding his embarrassment at being caught. He stood and straightened his sleeves, "Breakfast is soon. We should get cleaned up. I didn't want to say anything before, but you could use a shower, Shadow."

"Shuddup." Shadow pushed his friend on the shoulder, but then he ran his hands through his curls and made a face. The two laughed at his expression and he sighed. "I guess I'll see you two downstairs," he told them before making his way to the bathroom, casting a wave over his shoulder.

As soon as he was sure Shadow was gone, Neville turned to look at the Slytherin. "How long was he up?"

"Don't know. A while before I got here. Why?" Draco narrowed his eyes at the chubby Gryf. He still didn't like Longbottom much, but they had come to a sort of truce when it came to Shadow.

"He had a nightmare the night before last night, too." Neville bit his lip and wondered how much he
could say. He settled for, "I'm just worried he's not getting enough sleep."

Draco shifted his shoulders. He was worried, too. Shadow looked tired and he was beginning to have circles under his eyes. How many times had he dreamed of releasing Demon and enjoying it? Or was he having nightmares about other things as well?

"Maybe we should tell Snape?" Neville asked.

Draco glared. "We will do no such thing. If it comes to that, we'll tell Shadow we think he should talk to Severus himself. I don't believe friends go behind each other’s backs, but I could be wrong." With that, he stalked from the room, leaving Neville flushed and feeling stupid.

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Severus found the teenagers finishing breakfast. "I'll go check on Black and Lupin," he told them. "When I am finished, I need to speak to Shadow. In the parlor, please."

"Yes, sir," Shadow agreed.

Severus nodded and went upstairs. Black was sleeping beside the Wolf. He looked unharmed, but Lupin was feverish and whimpering even though he was unconscious. Scowling, the Potions Master placed several bottles on the nightstand. Last night marked the last the Wolf would change this month, so he could use the healing draughts that hadn’t been practical before now.

On the way downstairs, Severus stopped and changed his clothes. He considered taking a quick shower, but he was anxious to talk with his son, so he merely washed his face. Brewing all night was hell on his hair, so he quickly tied the greasy locks back in a low ponytail. Ready for the confrontation ahead, he made his way to the parlor and was glad to see Shadow sitting alone. He noticed the slight circles under the teen’s eyes and that his face was paler than normal, but Shadow's eyes were also alert and sharp, his posture steady.

"The Order has very little information that we were not already aware of," he began, sitting in the chair across from the couch that Shadow favored. "I've already set into motion establishing your identity as my son. Minerva continues to support us and has sworn to testifying that you have been under Hogwarts' protection all these long years. We have an interview at the Ministry in eight days to finalize it all."

Shadow frowned. "Is that a good idea? The Ministry wants you in prison." He wanted to return to Hogwarts as Shadow Snape, but he wasn't willing to risk Severus to achieve that.

"They cannot harm me with the evidence they have," Severus assured. "And they aren't quite at the point of arresting me without trial. I believe we are safe enough for now to accomplish this."

"Will we be put under Veritaserum?"

"Definitely, but I have an immunity and I can brew you a potion that will temporarily grant you the same. It is untraceable, but you will get sick about five hours after mixing the antidote with the Veritaserum."

"That's fine. I doubt they'll question me that long," Shadow shrugged. He leaned forward, eyes intent. "So what's the story you've come up with?"

Severus leaned back and regarded his son through expressionless eyes. He had considered the matter very thoroughly and the scenario he had told Minerva was the best way to go, but he was concerned. Would Shadow want to be the child of such a union, no matter how the story ended? Would it
further damage Shadow’s fragile self-image to be forced to adopt such history? Severus certainly wished he could give his son a better beginning, but he saw little else he could do.

"Severus…” Shadow frowned. He knew the hesitation wasn't a good sign.

In answer, the man removed a piece of parchment from his inner robe pocket. "This is a general timeline of the most credible history I could create for you. It's my background; most is truth, some is falsehood."

Shadow held Severus' gaze for a minute before looking down at the paper. It read:

1979

May- graduate from Hogwarts

August- join Death Eaters

1980

April- switch from Dark to Light side and become spy

July- rape Amalia on a raid, she gets pregnant

1981

Feb 24th- Shadow is born

Oct 31st- Dark Lord falls

Nov 2nd- go to Azkaban

1982

Jan 19th- released from Azkaban

March 21st- propose to Amalia, told of Shadow’s existence

April 4th- marry Amalia

Dec 4th- House complete

1983

Jan 2- start working at Hogwarts

Jan 12th- Amalia begins showing and tells me she's three months pregnant

June 5th- Tabitha is born

Oct 15th- Tabitha and Amalia attacked and tortured

Nov 1st- they die, go to Albus and beg him put Shadow under Hogwarts' protection, Headmaster agrees

Nov 2nd- destroy all Ministry records of Shadow to protect him from further attacks against me

Shadow took a deep breath, his eyes going unfocused. Severus had committed himself to telling the
world - He had already told McGonagall - that on a raid while spying he had raped Amalia, the only woman he had ever loved, the mother of his true daughter. Shadow’s hand clenched, the paper loudly crumpling, and he lifted, eyes blazing with fury.

Severus had to admit, if only to himself, that his son looked quite intimidating, his blue eye, his green, both glowing with an inhumane light as his powerful magic began slashing through the air like razor-sharp blades, but he was also encouraged. If Shadow’s response was anger on behalf of Amalia, he was not feeling humiliated or ashamed.

"This is the story as I see it," he spoke calmly and crossed his legs, the picture of unconcern. "Amalia happened to be in the way of a raid. I was under scrutiny, suspicion beginning to surround me, so I demonstrated my loyalty by raping a defiant witch. It was the best compromise I could invent at the moment since I wished to kill as few people as possible. Still, it was devastating for both of us. As soon as I could return, I did. I helped the witch get home. The witch was frightened, angry, and confused, but by the time I had left, she had realized I hadn't wanted to hurt her.

"Fifteen months later, I met her again as the Law Witch working for the Ministry assigned to defend me. I discovered her name to be Amalia Ashton. She revealed to me that after coming to terms with the horrific event and having time to consider everything, she had come to believe me as much a victim as she had been. She took my case and fought to get me free.

"I spent three months in Azkaban during the trials and was finally released in January of '82. I was a wreck and Amalia took it upon herself to help me get back on my feet. Two months later, when I was stable again, I proposed to her. She accepted and revealed that she had a son, named Shadow, conceived the night of the raid. She would have told me before, but was afraid our son would be in danger while the Dark Lord still lived. When the Dark Lord fell, I was a wreck, so she continued to keep it secret until she felt I could handle the news.

"I met my son for the first time a few months after his first birthday. I married Amalia two weeks later. We then went into isolation, which is expected for newlyweds. Almost eight months later, Albus finally convinced me to work for Hogwarts and I started as Potions teacher on the first day of the second term of '83. Meanwhile, Amalia agreed to stay in hiding, for fear of retribution for my damming testimony in many trials.

"Less than two weeks later, she revealed that the extra weight she had gained was because she was three months pregnant with our second child. On June 5th, Tabitha was born at home with a medi-wizard in attendance. Her birth was filed privately with the Ministry and goes unnoticed. Near Halloween, Amalia decided to go shopping for costumes. You were ill and left with Omi. They were attacked and I took them to St. Mundo’s for treatment.

"The world was shocked by the attack and astonished that I had a wife and daughter since I had kept everything as private as possible. A few weeks later, they both died despite the Healers doing all they could. I went to the Headmaster and asked for him to put you under Hogwarts’ protection, which basically meant you remained hidden from the world and was schooled privately under Hogwarts’ supervision instead of the Ministry’s.

“However, with the death of the Headmaster and my attempt to defend him on the rooftop against assassination, I fear that the threat against your life is worse than ever. A house elf and secrecy is no longer protection enough, so I decided to reinstate your identity with the Ministry and enroll you officially at Hogwarts so that I may watch over you more closely."

Shadow said nothing. It was a tight plan. It obviously past muster with McGonagall, but… Shadow still wasn't willing to have it believed of his father that he had raped the woman he had loved.
Severus read the continued reluctance loud and clear in his son's expression. He sighed and rubbed at his face. "I am... sad that the story hinges on me testifying to crimes against Amalia, but... I am certain that she would approve when it is giving you this freedom. She would have loved you greatly and gladly considered you her son."

Shadow shook his head, mouth a stubborn line. "It is not acceptable."

"Trust me. This is the best way. It will be instantly believed that I was capable of such acts by those who think me a Death Eater and it will gain me more sympathy for my work as a spy to those more charitable to my situation. It also sets an example. If Amalia and Albus could forgive me such deeds, then they have no right to condemn me."

"Still," Shadow said stubbornly.

Severus leaned forward and captured his son's gaze. "Listen to me. I am not despoiling my honor with this tale. I may not have raped Amalia, but I am guilty of equally heinous crimes. Do you understand that? I am not sacrificing anything with this story. She was aware of the things I had done. Amalia did forgive me. There is more truth to this tale than you realize. It is the best way to proceed. I have considered the matter and this is the solution I have found."

Shadow leaned back, frustrated and pissed that his father was right. He rubbed at his mouth and finally gave a tight nod. "All right. I accept. Not that I have much choice. You have already told McGonagall." He scowled. "Thanks, by the way. I would have liked to talk to you about it first before moving."

"I am aware." Severus leaned back as well, giving Shadow space. "I was planning on discussing it with you before hand, but circumstances forced me to move quickly. I had to take the opening the Headmistress gave me before it disappeared. Had I waited, the story would have lost credibility and her agreement was vital for the plan to work. She must testify that at Albus's death she received notice that you were under the school's protection and received all your files."

Shadow lifted an eyebrow. "About those files?"

"I have them. Some are forgeries, the best my illicit and trustworthy sources could create or obtain. Others are Tabitha's, modified so they pass as yours. I have all that we require, but you will have to spend the rest of the holiday at the Order's headquarters and take placement exams to be sure you are at your peers’ level."

Shadow straightened the parchment in his hand and looked at it again. "You have me conceived in the month I was really born. And my new birthday as February 24th, 1981. That means I'll be starting Hogwarts as a Fourth year instead of a Fifth year."

"It would be too suspicious for you to enter as a Fifth year student. Harry Potter going missing and then you suddenly arrive in his year? That wouldn't work," Severus explained.

"Why February? You made Amalia give birth two months early, she only carried me for seven months, so I assume that date has significance to you," Shadow pointed out.

"It does." Amusement flared up in Severus' aura, though his face remained neutral. Shadow narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Do you not recognize the date?"

"No," he frowned. "Should I?"

"The Second Task was held on February 24th. It was the day Harry merged with Silas and you became who you are now."
Shadow blushed, amazed at how much thought Severus really had put into this. "It is a perfect birthday. Thank you."

Severus inclined his head. "I wish to give you Pensieve memories of my time building this house with Amalia. As well as the memory of Tabitha being born. You should know as much as you can about her if she is to be your mother."

"Will the Ministry do a blood test on me?" Shadow asked, uncomfortable with the idea of sharing Severus's cherished memories.

Severus allowed the change in subject. For now. "They will, but they only have my blood to compare yours to since Amalia is dead. They will find our blood does match thanks to the adoption ceremony, so that won't affect the story."

"And what have I been doing these fourteen years?"

"You have had private tutors. Again, I have the necessary documents to prove this. Omi has been your main caregiver and I have come home as much as I can. During the summer, we have gone traveling." A perfectly sly smile spread across his face. "This strange and isolated childhood will be the excuse for any personality and behavioral quirks you evidence."

"Are you saying I'm strange?" Shadow tried to glare, but he was smiling, too.

"You are not an average fourteen year old, certainly." Severus answered dryly. "The fact that you are Severus Snape's son will also explain away your temperament and maturity."

"Very well." Shadow sighed and slouched back into the couch. "You've convinced me."

"Good." Severus stood and gestured for Shadow to rise. "I've promised the Headmistress that I shall bring you to Headquarters soon. We only have a day or two for you to view all the memories of Amalia and Tabitha that you should have. We will also need to discuss more concretely how you've been occupying your time so we have our stories straight. You'll have to memorize the list of your tutors and their information, as well as memorize my own and Amalia's family history."

Shadow stood, grim in the face of the daunting tasks ahead of him. "What about Neville and Draco?"

"They can't follow you to Headquarters. They can stay here or they can return to their homes."

"Draco can't go home," Shadow protested.

"Then he will remain with Black and Lupin, although Lupin may be coming and going for Order meetings now that we know they have been trying to contact him." Severus was already walking out of the room and toward the stairs. "There is less than a month before school starts. I'm sure Draco will survive."

Shadow didn't say anything, but he was greatly disappointed. He was just getting stronger after the graveyard and had been looking forward to spending a few weeks having Neville and Draco to himself. He sighed. The world waited for no one. If he was going to do this - if he was going to truly become Shadow Snape - he had to set the foundation. It was critical to become the identity that was, at the moment, merely a vague notion in his head.

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Amalia was an incredible woman. She was average in looks. She had brown wavy hair to her
shoulders, thick lips, tiny nose, and full, arched eyebrows over blue eyes. She stood about five feet five inches tall and was neither thin nor fat, but she was incredibly passionate. Amalia argued and laughed and did nothing quietly. Even when she was silent, she was loud, either with meaningful glances and smiles or with gestures.

Shadow watched as she and Severus fought over size and placement of rooms. He stood there, invisible to the newlywed couple, as they lived and worked side-by-side. They argued for three days on the shape of the library. Finally, Severus suggested a game room just to distract her, so that he could build it his way.

He watched how Amalia would always touch Severus - whether it was a hand on his arm or wrapping her arms around him from behind. Rarely did he ever see Severus instigate a kiss or hug, but that didn't bother Amalia in the least. They were so happy.

Amalia liked to bake. She'd send Omi out just so she could have the kitchen without terrorizing the little elf. She'd bake barefoot, and in this particular memory, her belly was swollen. She'd talk to her unborn child and laugh, all the while bustling about making a mess more than she was making cookies.

When Severus was beating her at chess, Amalia would pinch his calves with her toes to distract him.

At dinner, they always sat adjacent from each other, and would talk about a lot of different things. Sometimes it would be about the Daily Prophet, but mostly they talked about new spells and inventions, foreign politics and Hogwarts.

Tabitha was born in the game room, of all places. Amalia was playing the evasion game when her water broke. Omi fetched Severus who fetched the medi-wizard. Tabitha was born twenty minutes later. She was a long, thin baby, was red and blotchy, and she screamed for hours until she finally fell asleep.

Amalia slept in the nursery for three weeks after Tabby was born, her hand in the crib with her daughter so she never lost contact.

The baby was very mobile for her age. She hated staying still. She constantly waved her arms and kicked her legs. She was happy, too. She giggled and laughed and grasped any finger in reach. Her eyes were as blue as her mothers, but her baby curls were black.

Tabby loved to splash in the sink and Amalia would blow bubbles over her stomach just to hear her scream with laughter.

Amalia literally jumped up and down with joy as she watched Tabby pull herself into a shaky crawling position for the first time.

One night, Tabitha's stomach pained her. She cried and whimpered for hours. Amalia and Severus took turns walking her around the house, patting her back and rubbing her belly. She was too young for strong potions and the mild ones only dimmed the pain, not removed it. Near dawn, Tabby finally fell into exhausted slumber. Severus sat with his back to the couch in front of the fire in the sitting room. Amalia sat between his legs, her back to his chest. Tabby lay across her lap, and both of them slept with small smiles as Severus watched over them.

But it wasn't all heavenly, though most of the memories were perfect.

In the first true fight Shadow witnessed, Amalia was tired of Severus never coming home. She wanted him to start his own potions store and quit Hogwarts. She even threw a vase at his head in
fury when Severus insisted that he couldn't, that he owed Albus and couldn't abandon him.

Another time, Severus came home one day early from Hogwarts to find the house empty. He flew into a panic, but before he could contact anyone for help Amalia strode in through the door carrying a sleeping Tabitha. She had gone to the Muggle park in the neighborhood for a picnic. Severus screamed at her that she was being reckless. How dare she endanger herself and their child? The baby woke up and wailed. Amalia walked the baby to the nursery, calming her as she went. She returned and screamed back that she had to go outside sometime for fresh air and sun. The house was their sanctuary, not their prison.

He watched as Severus sometimes became depressed and retreated from Amalia and Tabby. Shadow could almost see the darkness of his guilt and sense of unworthiness. Amalia always hunted him out and got in his face. He would list the horrible things he was guilty of, and she would counter with a list of good things he had done. It would boil down to Severus screaming that his good deeds didn't mean as much as his crimes, and she would yell that they meant more. Severus would break down crying and Amalia would hold him until the storm passed.

Despite the fights they never slept in separate rooms and they always made up by morning.

Shadow spent almost eight hours in the Pensieve. He came to know a side of Severus he hadn't really imagined. He saw glimpses sometimes, but deep down Shadow still questioned the man's motives for adopting him. Those doubts were shattered forever as he saw the young Severus Snape who desperately loved and wanted his family.

And Amalia… Amalia was a beautiful, loving mother. This was a mother's love. This was what he had been searching for so earnestly in Petunia. This was what he lost the night Voldemort came for him. Amalia was the first mother he ever new, no matter that she was dead. He only had fantasies of Lily, and Petunia offered only a perverse facsimile of motherhood, while Amalia's voice and laugh, her smile and her smell, her love and tenderness was now real to him, known to him.

Shadow came out of the Pensieve, landing on the floor near his father's bed. Severus was sitting at the desk in the corner and he looked up with his usual impassive eyes. Shadow was appalled to discover his own lips were trembling and that he had tears in his eyes. He wanted Amalia to walk through the door and smile, come over with a bright laugh and hug him, as if to say 'What took you so long?'

Severus' eyebrows descended as he frowned, but before he could question the expression on Shadow's face, the teen morphed into his lynx form. Severus sighed softly and rose. The large cat didn't move as he approached, but the short tail lashed from side to side. Long fingers carded gently through the soft fur between the lynx's ears. It took a few minutes, but eventually the large cat relaxed and began to purr, eyes slitted with contentment.

"You've had a trying day. I'm certain your body needs to rest," Severus murmured. It was true, but it was also an excuse for Shadow to remain in this form, allowing him to postpone their discussion.

Shadow mewed and licked Severus's hand before padding out of the room. He made his way silently through the house and growled with excitement when he caught the scent of dinner. He bounded downstairs and loped into the dining room.

"Well, look who decided to join us." Sirius grinned. "Care for some cat food?"

Shadow hissed at him and jumped into his normal chair. He placed his front paws on the table and looked expectantly at Draco's plate of food next to him.
"I hardly think this will be good for you in that form," Draco drawled, gesturing to his meat pie.

"I think it will be fine." Remus smiled gently at his charge. "He still needs to recover and any food we can get into him is a good thing."

The lynx licked his whiskers in agreement, making Neville - who sat across from him - laugh.

Draco gave in and slid the rest of his dish over to the feline. Shadow didn't hesitate to begin stuffing his face. Draco wrinkled his nose in disdain and sneered when Sirius transformed into a dog so he could eat that way as well.

"Sirs!" Omi cried in dismay.

"It's fine, Omi," Neville reassured him. "I think they were too impatient to get your wonderful dinner into their bellies to eat with their hands."

"Would Draco Sir like more dinner?" the elf asked, deciding to ignore the two animals making a mess on the table cloth.

Draco shook his head. "I believe I've lost my appetite." He was watching the lynx with a sort of horrified fascination. This was so far from Pureblood manners that it really couldn't compare.

Shadow took great pleasure in further shocking the blond when Omi served pudding for desert. Padfoot plunged in, sending pudding flying, but Shadow gave his bowl long, slow licks with his rough tongue. The blond's eyes went wide and Shadow purred with delighted humor. Even Neville burst into peals of laughter at the blond's expression.

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After dinner, Severus had everyone gather in the sitting room. Shadow stubbornly held his Animagus form while his father explained what he had discovered at Headquarters and what he had constructed as their cover story. He also told them about the Ministry's Inquiry they had to attend in a few days and about having to stay at Headquarters for the rest of summer. Needless to say, there was enough information that everyone found something not to like.

"An Inquiry! Are you mad, Snape?" Sirius glared. "Shadow isn't going anywhere near the Ministry." He still held a grudge toward the Ministry for locking him away without a trial unfairly. He wouldn't allow something like that to happen to his godson.

"I don't see why he can't come back here," Draco complained with a frown. "Why does he have to stay at Headquarters?"

"Is this really healthy? You're asking Shadow to adopt a false identity," Remus spoke up. "How is this different from creating a new alter?"

"Everyone's going to know Shadow is Harry Potter if we don't hide the lightning bolt scar," Neville fretted.

Severus sneered at them and folded his hands across his stomach. "First, it's a little late to fear Harry treating his new identity as an alter. It would be a valid concern except I am putting no behavior requirements or expectations on him. Yes, I have created a false history, but he is now free to act and think any way he chooses. He is free to be himself without the expectations of the Boy-Who-Lived, which, need I remind you, did create enough stress for him to create new alters. Of course, if I feel he is beginning to act in a way he thinks Shadow Snape would act, instead of how he truly feels and thinks then I will, of course, discuss the problem with him."
"Second, the Ministry acknowledging Shadow Snape exists is essential for this deception to work. There are no second chances. If we do not do this, the chance of Shadow being discovered as Harry Potter will increase exponentially.

"Third, the curse scar left by the failed Killing Curse is a problem, but one I hope Lupin can help us overcome. It cannot be removed and even if we were able to successfully put a glamour on it, the glamour would be discovered and cast suspicions on Shadow."

"Are Shadow's other scars from the graveyard curse scars, too?" Neville asked. His brown eyes rested on the lynx worriedly. "Those wounds were inflicted with magic as well. How are you going to explain those to the Ministry?"

Severus shook his head. "They are not."

"A curse scar is a scar created by a magical curse unable to complete its purpose," Remus explained. "The failed or incomplete curse leaves a residue that wishes to finish its job, but doesn't have the power to do so. The curses that injured Shadow in the graveyard were all allowed to do what they were made to do, so there is no magical residue left to resist healing. If Shadow continues with his weekly skin treatments, they should all disappear in about three months."

"Oh. Well, that's good," Neville sighed. He smiled at his brother and Remus in relief. He was glad Shadow wouldn't have to carry the heavy scarring on his body for the rest of his life.

"I'm curious, Severus," Remus said, leaning toward the man. His amber eyes were wide and watchful. "What do you think we can do about the curse scar he does have? You said yourself that it can't be removed."

"Yes, but can we move it?"

Remus frowned. "The scar contains spell residue aimed at Shadow's brain, trying to kill him. We may, perhaps, be able to anchor remnants of the curse to a different vital organ, but it would have to be the near equal to the brain. Our best chance would be the heart. This is all theoretical, of course, since it has already anchored in the skin over his brain. There's no way to make it shift now."

"I think I may have thought of a solution," Severus admitted. "It will be a precarious operation, but I believe we can succeed."

"I already hate it," Sirius growled, crossing his arms and glaring at the Slytherin.

Neville's expression clearly stated he agreed with the man, but Draco was intrigued.

"What if we can convince the curse that Shadow is brain dead yet lives. It would stop anchoring to the head because the death of the brain did not result in the death of the organism it was designed to kill. It would shift and anchor to the next vital organ. The heart, as you said. It will be much easier to keep the scar covered and hidden if it were on his chest."

Remus paled. "He would have to be more than unconscious for that to work. It's too dangerous. How would we wake him again?"

"I agree inducing a coma deep enough to trick the Killing Curse would be too dangerous," Severus smiled grimly. "But I have discovered a possible spell that will help us. We will stop time within Shadow's head, leaving his body in normal time, creating the illusion of no brain activity. He won't really be in a coma."

Sirius jumped to his feet. "This is insane!"
"I've never heard of such a spell," Neville whispered, feeling ill.

Ice was traveling up Remus's spine. If Severus really had found a spell to do such a thing, the theory said this was indeed possible, but it was still risky as hell and he didn't want to do it. On the other hand, Severus was backing them all in a corner. What the hell were they supposed to do?

"It is a combination of an advanced Runeology and time magic," Severus revealed. "I have my notes and sources in my office."

Remus scrubbed at his face, desperately trying to think of some way around this.

"Did you hear me? You aren't doing this crazy procedure on Shadow! I won't allow it! And he's not going to the Ministry, either!" Sirius bellowed. He lunged at Severus and lifted the man by his robes, sending the chair Severus was sitting in flying backward with a loud crash. "How could you even consider this? Shadow is supposedly your son, for Merlin's sake! How can you risk him?"

Severus whispered a spell and Sirius yelped as he was shoved away. He tripped on the rug and fell, very nearly hitting his head on the corner of the fireplace.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Black," Severus snarled and straightened his robes. "I am aware of the risk, but it isn't nearly as dangerous as you think."

"I'd like to see your notes," Remus spoke up.

Severus nodded and gestured for the werewolf to precede him. "Shadow, you are welcome to come with us. The decision is ultimately yours."

"Damn right!" Sirius growled, getting to his feet. "I'm going to research glamours, so don't you agree to anything just yet," he told his godson before pushing past both Remus and Severus.

Remus followed him silently.

Shadow returned to his human form and met his father's gaze. "I'll be there in a minute. I want Remus to look over it first."

Severus nodded and left the three teenagers alone.

"I still don't see why you can't return here after the Inquiry," Draco sniffed.

Neville stared at him in amazement. How could the blond still be worried about that when Shadow was facing so much more important things, like being brain dead?

Shadow understood, however. Draco was helping him think of other things. "A key part of this mess is pretending that Severus believes the house isn't safe enough for me anymore. It would look strange if he let me come back here when the Headmistress has offered to let me stay in the very well protected Order of the Phoenix Headquarters."

"So I'm just supposed to stay here with the Mutts?" Draco sneered.

Shadow sighed and took the seat next to the blond. Neville sat across from them, just listening.

"Think of it as a chance to study without distraction."

"That isn't funny." Draco glared.

"You said you wanted to become an Animagus as soon as possible," Shadow shrugged with a half-smile. "This is the best thing that could happen to allow that. You'll have Sirius almost to yourself."
"You're taking this rather calmly." Neville shook his head, feeling numb. "I'd be terrified of that spell ritual thing Professor Snape was talking about."

Shadow laughed and it wasn't a happy sound. "You have no idea, brother. That's my head they're talking about, but... What can I do? Something has to be done with this stupid scar. Sirius is looking into glamours, but if Severus can convince Remus that the ritual will work, I trust them not to kill me. Of course, I'm also going to study the procedure until I feel confident myself that it can be done, but it's not like I have a whole bunch of other alternatives."

"Can I do anything to help?" Neville asked. He wanted so badly to be useful.

Shadow smiled at him. "Actually. There is something you and Draco can do."

"What?" the blond immediately perked up.

"The story says I've been raised here with Omi and Severus with occasional tutors. I need your help understanding what exactly that entails. Would you two be willing to put your childhood lessons in a Pensieve so I can know first hand what I'm claiming to have gone through?"

Draco inclined his head. "Of course."

Neville fidgeted, his face tight with unhappiness. "I was taught the basics by my grandmother, and when I turned eight, they sent me to a day school with other Wizarding children to help prepare me for Hogwarts. I don't know if that will be helpful."

"That actually sounds perfect. It gives me something to compare and contrast with the memories Draco will provide." He looked over at the Slytherin and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm assuming you had private tutors and the best of everything."

"You assume correctly," Draco smirked. "But there were also times that I was placed in lessons with my fellow upper-class peers. Like riding lessons, for example. And I attended several parties a month."

"Great," Shadow drawled, amused. "Then I'll need both of your memories. I'll see if I can get Sev- I mean, Father. I'm going to have to get use to saying that. - to let you borrow a Pensieve. Maybe you two could even work together and collaborate, picking only the most telling memories."

Draco shot and unhappy look at the chubby Gryffindor, but he didn't refuse. Neville met his eyes, obviously determined to do this for Shadow.

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Shadow and Remus spent the night squirreled away with Severus and his notes. Sirius was equally busy in the library and was growing ever more frustrated when his search turned up nothing useful. Neville and Draco remained in the sitting room with a Pensieve sitting on the coffee table between their two couches.

They faced each other and took turns viewing each other's memories, then debating on if it would be helpful for Shadow to see it or not. Draco spent a lot of time insulting the timid Gryffindor and his memories. At first, Neville stammered and flushed under the onslaught. He knew what his memories looked like. He was clumsy and stupid, always being scolded and humiliated, but at the end of the second hour, he snapped.

"And you think a memory of you being pandered to and having elves grovel at your feet bringing you sweets when you caught the Dragon pox will help him?" Neville yelled, eyes finally flashing.
"It shows a common Wizarding illness, Longbottom. It's something he would be aware of in a Wizarding household," Draco sneered, lifting his nose and narrowing his eyes in disdain.

"I hardly think seeing you lounge in a bed three times too big will teach him anything about Dragon pox." Neville was panting, he was so angry. His face was red and his fists were clenched at his sides. "It's no wonder your sense of reality is so distorted if you actually think that is suffering from an illness. You were so doped up on the most expensive potions, you could hardly feel it!"

"What would you know?" Draco hissed.

Neville put his wand to his head and furiously removed a memory. He put it in the Pensieve and dared Draco with a look to enter it. The blond rolled his eyes and pushed his head in the silver bowl. His callous attitude fell away, however, as he watched a seven-year-old Neville Longbottom suffer.

Neville wasn't given any medicine because it was believed it would make him stronger to do without. The boy wailed and had to be restrained from itching himself. Tied to the bed, his fevered delusions and painful rash had to be endured for three days before the illness finally passed.

"That certainly displayed the full effects of the pox," Draco allowed when he was back in the sitting room.

Neville gave him a grim little smile and from then on the blond eased up on his insults and disdain. Draco realized he might actually be learning as much as Shadow would when he saw what they had put together for him.

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Around dawn, Remus and Shadow felt they finally understood the process and had even made a few adjustments to better the chances of success. Now they only had to test it. Severus called Omi and told the elf to fetch them a rabbit from outside. The house elf returned quickly with the required animal. Severus placed the rabbit in the rune circle that temporarily paralyzed it, its head in the smaller circle that would trap all time changes within it. Then he cast an advanced variation of the Tempus Charm, stopping time within that circle.

Remus then brought up the metal rod he had spelled to be able to read brain activity. Because of the delicate spell and rune work around the rabbit, no more magic could be used on its body. The rod revealed no brain activity. Then he picked up a second rod that would monitor life signs. It reported the rabbit was dead from the neck up, but perfectly healthy from the neck down. It worked.

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Sirius woke with a jolt. The sound of dozens of books falling noisily to the floor further unbalanced him and he fell from his chair with a thud, several hardback books digging into his hip and back.

“Sorry.” Shadow grinned and offered his hand.

Sirius took it, scowling and grumbling about ungrateful godsons. He must have fallen asleep while reading. His jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled and were uncomfortable and his hair must look a mess. Then he woke up enough to notice he wasn't the only one looking ragged. Shadow was paler than normal and he had dark circles under his strange eyes.

"Are you all right?"

“Yeah.” The teen smiled ruefully and messed up his curls. "I haven't been sleeping well lately and I've been up for about twenty hours now. Remus and I have gone over Severus's idea with a fine
tooth comb and we've even tested it. It'll work."

"No. Shadow, this is too risky" Sirius gently took the teen by his shoulders. "We'll think of something else."

"Could you find an unnoticeable, unbreakable glamour that will work with curse scars?" Shadow asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"No," Sirius muttered. "But…"

"No buts." Shadow shook his head and gently pulled away. "The Inquiry is in a few days and Severus promised we would come to Headquarters today, tomorrow at the latest." He reached over and pat Sirius's arm reassuringly. "It'll be fine. Really. We tested it. I won't get hurt."

"How did you test it?" Sirius crossed his arms. His blue eyes were bright with stubbornness. "You don't know for sure you won't get hurt. It's not worth it."

"Says the man who took me Auror baiting when we were both half-crazy," Shadow smiled. "We tested it on a rabbit. It came out of the procedure perfectly fine."

"You're not a rabbit." He scowled fiercely. "I don't like this."

"I know, but it's going to happen."

"When?"

"Remus and Sirius are going to sleep for five hours. We'll do it at 10:30. I just came in to tell you."

Sirius sighed. "You should get some sleep yourself."

"I will," Shadow answered, although he had no intention of going to bed. "Don't bother them, okay, Siri? They need to sleep so they don't make a mistake later."

Sirius huffed, but nodded. "Fine. I'll hold my bitching for when they wake up. Omi!"

"Yes, sir?" the elf asked as soon as he appeared.

"Inform me the second Remus gets up, all right?"

"Very well, sir." Omi bowed and disappeared.

"What are you going to do?" Shadow asked as his godfather bent to pick up the fallen books.

"I'm going to find you an alternative," Sirius answered. He sat back down at the table and brushed his long hair from his face with fierce determination.

Shadow shook his head, smiling with fond amusement, and left him to it.

Quietly, instead of going up to bed, Shadow made his way to the sitting room where he found his brother and friend still muttering over the Pensieve. He stood in the doorway, just watching them. He did need the memories they had worked out for him but more importantly he had hoped this would teach them how to work together. And it seemed his plan had worked.

Neville spoke in tired yet self-assured tones. Draco listened and responded in kind, without his usual defensive arrogance or the prejudiced contempt. They debated instead of argued. They really were working together. He smiled, but wiped his expression blank before stepping into the room. It
wouldn't do for the two to become suspicious and destroy the good thing they had started.

"Well. The time spell will work," he said.

The two looked up anxiously, but Neville spoke first. "Are you sure you won't get hurt?"

"Pretty sure." Shadow shrugged and came up to the Pensieve. "Can I start viewing the memories?"

Draco nodded. "We've narrowed it down as much as we can, but it will still take a good four hours to view them all."

"Perfect. We're going to start the spell at ten thirty." Shadow put his hands on the bowl.

"We've decided to come with you and explain as we go," Neville said before his brother disappeared.

"Yeah? This promises to be a fun ride." He grinned and lowered his head into the silvery fluid.

Draco went next and Neville followed. They arrived in Draco's memory first. He was about five and was sitting in a small room transformed into a classroom. There was a blackboard at the front and big capital letters wrote themselves as the tutor in dark blue robes lectured the little blond. Little Draco dutifully repeated the letters as they appeared, but he quickly grew bored.

"I'm tired of lessons," he whined in a high-pitched voice. "Can't I go play in the garden with Mother, Instructor Griffith?"

"No," the man scowled. It was quite frightening, actually. His face had been completely lax and blank during the recital of the alphabet, but now it twisted with wrinkles and sharp lines at the mouth and eyebrows. "You are a pureblood, Mr. Malfoy. Act like it, please, or I'll be forced to tell your father that you are too stupid to be taught! Letters are the easiest thing. Everyone can read, you stupid child. Do you want to be the only one who can't? Even your friend, Miss Parkinson, can read. How will you learn anything if you can't do this simple task? Now, repeat after me! A…"

"A," the much subdued little Draco answered.

Present-time Draco smiled. "Emotional blackmail was often used to teach a lesson. I think it's because spoiled and aristocratic children tend not to respond to anything else. Certainly it worked. Within a few days, I could repeat the alphabet and recognize letters. In a month, I was writing both lower and upper case letters on command."

Shadow nodded. This was definitely different than how he had learned in a Muggle public school with twenty other children and one teacher. The memory blurred and they were in a homey living room. Five year old Neville sat at a small writing desk near a window. A tall, heavy-set woman with sharp eyes and a perpetual frown stood over the small, shy child. She whacked his hand hard and the boy stifled a yelp.

"The curl at the top of a capital A is to the right. Look at mine! It's right in front of you! I can hardly tell these two letters are related, let alone the same one! Focus, Neville."

"Sorry, Mamaw," the little boy whispered and tried very hard to get it right.

"The next lesson Wizarding children are taught is in cursive, formal script," Neville explained. "This is done by rote and repetition. I had to sit for hours at a time just practicing how to write calligraphy."

"There's even a class for Muggleborns to take at Hogwarts during their Seventh year so they aren't
clueless when they go into the workforce and are forced to write contacts or other such things that require penmanship," Draco added. "Though you can still tell who’s Pureblood because our skill is better from longer practice."

The memory blurred and Shadow watched and listened to his friends explain the lessons they grew up with. Lessons of strategy and simple mathematics. Neville had lessons in ethics. Draco had lessons in business and economics. What really stood out were the story lessons where both Draco and Neville were sat down and told history and magical theory in story form. It definitely made it easier to learn and remember when taught like that.

Shadow got to see eight-year-old Draco get on a horse for the first time with Vincent, Gregory, and Pansy in the same class as him. He watched as Draco tried to act like he knew how to ride already. He tried to portray that he was the best, and he was pureblood, and he was heir to a fortune with every gesture and every word, but he came across as bratty and pompous.

He watched as Neville went to the day school. It was the first time he’d ever really interacted with kids his own age and was terrified. He was teased, but mostly ignored. The teacher led them in songs and did magic for them, told them more learning-stories. They colored and played. It was more like the Muggle school Shadow was familiar with.

He also saw how accidental magic was praised even when it was destructive.

Seven-year-old Draco was in his room, standing in his pajamas, his arms crossed, and scowling furiously at the elf that was hovering clothes his way.

"I don't want the grey! I wore those yesterday! I want the emerald robes!" Draco screamed at the creature.

"But Mistress Narcissa says Little Master Draco needs to wear his grey robes to Little Miss's birthday party," the elf pleaded.

"I don't want grey! I'm sick of grey! I hate it! I won't wear it!" the child screamed and tore the clothes from the air with his hands and threw them on the ground.

Older Draco explained, "My mother had gone through a faze where she loved the color on me because of my eyes and hair color. She put me in grey shirts, grey robes, grey socks and underwear. Everything for about a month at this point and I'd had it."

Shadow snickered and the blond scowled, reminding Neville and Shadow both of the child they were watching.

"I must be obeying my Mistress, Little Master, please wear the robes!"

"No! You can't make me!"

And with that cry the robes burst into flames.

Draco smirked. "Those robes cost a good deal of money."

The elf squeaked and disappeared. Little Draco just stared in astonishment at the robes, but his head snapped up when his door banged open and his mother strode into the room. The little boy's eyes went wide with worry, but Narcissa merely flung herself at her son and exclaimed over him.

"Oh, my little dragon! You're going to be such a powerful wizard one day! Look at you, you're getting so big! Your first big magic! I'm so proud! And you won't have to wear grey robes again if
you don't want to."

Little Draco's face lit up like the dawn and he grinned and wrapped his arms around his mother tight.

"I Apparated to the roof of my school when I was eight to get away from Dudley," Shadow recalled. "I got three weeks in the cupboard for that with bread and water only once a day."

"You Apparated?" Neville gasped while Draco stared in silent shock. "That's powerful magic, Harry! And so young, too!" Then he realized what name he called his brother and paled. A mistake like that in public would destroy everything they were working so hard to do, but Shadow didn't seem to notice the slip.

"It wasn't the first thing I did. I turned a teacher's hair blue when I was six, and when my aunt tried to shave my head bald when I was seven, it grew back over night as if she never touched it. That happened several times before she gave up. And I'm not even counting all the times Boy came Out to deal with Vernon and the physical abuse and healed our body afterward. That took some strong magic, too."

"You're very powerful, Shadow," Draco murmured. "Not everyone could do what you did. Split-personalities or not."

They went through more memories. Shadow listened to the things Wizarding children talked about as he watched a few of the gatherings Draco had attended with Pansy and the others. He got to see Wizarding customs and birthday rituals, magical games, magical punishments - like sweets being charmed to taste bland or being spelled color-blind or mute. Draco was even spelled asleep a couple times when he was being especially difficult.

Everything he witnessed was and wasn't similar to the things Shadow knew growing up with the Dursleys. In any case, after watching all these memories, he felt like he understood much better the childhood he supposedly had as Shadow Snape. It would be neither exactly like Draco's nor Neville's, but similar to both of them and also like his real childhood. He imagined it to be a blending of the three.

The three teenagers left the Pensieve.

Draco and Neville collected their memories and Shadow smiled tiredly at them both. "Thank you for doing this. I know it was hard to put them together so comprehensively and so organized. It really, really helped."

"No problem." Neville smiled happily, but he was just as tired. He yawned and blinked a few times to clear his eyes of the resulting tears.

"Why don't you two get some sleep? I'll come wake you up when the procedures over."

"No. I want to be there to watch." Draco frowned. He cast a quick Tempus charm and found it was ten o'clock. They had thirty minutes.

"You won't be allowed." Shadow ran his hands a few times threw his hair and rubbed at his face. "Only Severus and Remus will be with me. They can't afford any distractions or allow anything to increase the chance of a mistake. Not even Sirius will be allowed in the room."

As if summoned by his words, muffled shouting drifted through the open doorway.

Shadow smiled ruefully. "Looks like he's not happy with being barred from the room."
Draco scowled. "Neither am I."

"Come on." Shadow pushed him softly on the shoulder. "You're exhausted. Get some rest. I'll wake you as soon as I can, I promise."

"You need to rest, too," Neville spoke up before Draco could. "You're looking a bit peaky and I know you haven't been sleeping well regardless. Maybe you should rest a few hours and wait on this procedure."

Shadow shook his head. "No. It doesn't matter if I'm tired. I just have to lay there. I'll be fine. Go on. Get some sleep, both of you."

Draco resisted for one more minute before sighing and shrugging. "Fine. I can tell when I'm not wanted."

"You sure?" Neville bit his lip.

"Yes. Go to bed." Shadow hugged him briefly and shoved him toward the door.

Draco sneered at the display and left the room. Neville moved to follow, but he looked over his shoulder once. Shadow gestured for him to go, so he did. He gave them time to get upstairs before making his way to the parlor. Unlike the sitting room, which had an open arch, the parlor had a door that could be shut and locked. That's why they chose to set up the rune circles there.

Sirius and Remus were fighting in the corner while Severus crouched in the center of the room, triple checking all the runes. Shadow ignored his godfather and went to check the runes over himself. He worked in silence, Sirius and Remus an indistinct buzz in his ears, when long thin fingers snapped right in front of his face. He looked up to see Severus frowning severely at him.

"Are you well? I called your name three times."

Shadow shrugged. "I'm fine. Tired, but I'll be better once this is done."

"You look like you're becoming ill. Maybe we should postpone this," Severus offered, his dark eyes watching his son's face for any sign that he wasn't ready or had reservations about proceeding.

"No. I'm good and we don't have the time. Let's do this." He stood and turned to the others in the room. "Sirius, out!"

"But Harry!"

"Out," he repeated, unrelenting.

Sirius held his gaze for a second before throwing his hands in the air and storming from the room. He slammed the door behind him with a loud bang. Remus sighed and cast several spells on the door to lock it and create a sound ward so nothing could disturb them. He met Shadow's eyes as well and frowned. He went to say something, but Shadow held up his hand, forestalling him.

"I'm ready. Okay? Let's do this."

"Very well," Remus said and moved into position.

Shadow nodded and removed his T-shirt, leaving himself bare-chested. Then he stepped carefully into the large rune circle. He sat down and carefully positioned himself, then lay down with his head in the second, smaller rune circle. He listened to his father chant the activation phrase.
The two rune circles came to life, one paralyzing him and the other prepared to isolate all time magic around his head. Shadow lay there silently, completely unable to move a pinky or anything else. His heart rate picked up and he began to breathe faster, a flower of fear gently unfurling in his stomach. Then he heard his father chanting the time spell.

The room seemed to jump in his view. Everything shifting slightly as the light changed in a split second. Severus's form in the corner of his right eye disappeared and reappeared on his left. Remus had been nowhere to be seen, but then he was right beside him, leaning down with large worried eyes. Shadow gasped, the whole world tilting crazily as his mind tried to catch up with the lightning-fast changes in his perceptions.

"Are you okay? Can you hear me?" Remus asked softly. He held both rods in his hands and was running them up and down the teen's body.

"That was weird," Shadow grumbled, his head beginning to ache. "Did it work?"

"Yes." Severus smiled. "It worked just as we thought it would."

Shadow sat up with the help of Remus and looked at his scarred chest. A new one now lay right above his heart, slightly off center to the left in the shape of a lightning bolt. He lifted his hand and touched his forehead. It was perfectly smooth. Looking up at his father and Remus, he grinned.

"Good," he sighed, relieved, and fainted in the werewolf's arms.

Severus jerked forward, eyes blazing with worry. "What happened, Wolf?" he snapped.

Remus got his wand out and quickly ran diagnostic tests. He relaxed when the results scrolled in front of his eyes. "He's just over exhausted. He needs to sleep and eat. He'll be fine."

Severus relaxed and nodded. "He does look fatigued. I'll place him in bed. Why don't you inform the others that the procedure was a success?"

Remus nodded and allowed Severus to take the petite teen from his arms. He unwarded the door to let Severus out. Sirius and the two teens were waiting just outside in chairs. They jumped to their feet with worried exclamations.

"Shadow is fine. He's just exhausted and needs a few hours of sleep. The procedure was a success. The scar has been moved."

"What was it like?" Neville asked.

Remus frowned deeply. "It's not anything I'd like to go through again. It was like watching a short, thick worm move under Shadow's skin from his head to his chest."

"And that took two whole hours?" Sirius gasped, disgusted.

"No. It took about thirty minutes, but we let it set there for an hour and a half to make sure it was good and anchored and wouldn't move right back up to Shadow's head when we removed the time-spell."

"Well, I'm going to get a few more hours of sleep, myself," Draco announced and turned to go upstairs.

"That's a good idea," Remus sighed and leaned against the wall. The full moon wasn't that long ago and he'd been concentrating and worried for way too many hours. "Why don't we all get some more
sleep? I know it would make me feel better for you to stay in Shadow's room incase of a seizure, Neville."

The Gryffindor nodded and hurried upstairs to the bedroom he was sharing with his brother. Remus and Sirius followed silently. Sirius was still upset about how things had turned out and by the fact that Remus had chosen Severus's side over his several times now.

Remus was too tired to make conversation or even ask the source of the ex-convict's dark mood. Hopefully, things would get better soon. For all of them.

Chapter end.
Getting Things in Order

A/N: Happy Birthday, Harry! This update is for you. Cheers!

Getting Things In Order

Shadow, after two nights of nightmares, staying up for almost twenty-six hours, and still recovering from dozens of nearly fatal wounds, wasn't likely to regain consciousness anytime soon. That gave Severus a chance to prepare to move into Headquarters with his son.

Neville stayed by Shadow's bedside. He neither drew nor studied. Instead he sat deep in thought. It was amazing, really. After spending so many hours going over childhood memories with Draco, it made Neville realize just how much he had changed. On the outside, the change may seem slight, but inside it was a completely different matter. He wasn't as afraid of failure anymore. He didn't hate himself quite so much, and, believe it or not, he actually had a sense of competency that was completely missing in his younger self.

He hadn't thought the Sorting Hat knew what it was doing, placing him in Gryffindor. He was timid, weak, and an embarrassment to all wizards and an even bigger embarrassment to his parents. (Thank Merlin they were too insane to know it!) And he didn't have great magic to redeem his unforgivably pathetic character.

These thoughts made up the whole of his self-image not even a year ago, but then Harry and Remus had stepped into his life and began to make him believe it might be possible to think differently about himself. Remus had been there to spur him on and encourage him to stand up to his domineering grandmother. Remus understood and helped him deal with his cutting.

Over the years, Harry had shown him that he might not have to be alone. He had encouraged him to fight for some of his self-worth back from the man who had sexually abused them. Harry had cared enough to make sure his Earth Elemental magic didn't kill him or destroy his mind. He had caught him at his most despairing moment, when he had finally taken a knife to his wrists with the intention of ending his life. Harry had convinced him to live. And Harry was there to push him into actually moving past his fear and telling Ginny how he felt.

Together, Harry and Remus had helped Neville climb out of a spiral of depression and despair. The boy in his memories - the clumsy, worthless embarrassment to the Longbottom name that he saw glimpses of in those Pensieve memories - could never have done those things, could never have found the courage to accept help from anybody. That Neville Longbottom wouldn't have been able to believe that he did have a gift with plants, and that it wasn't worthless.

His cravings for his knife was lessening everyday. He still felt like slipping back into the old pattern of thinking and indulge in the old comfort, but every time he resisted, it got easier. Sometimes he fell and cut again, despaired again, but he finally trusted that his new family would be there to help him get up again. Remus and Harry would be there for him, no matter what. That alone made him feel just a tiny bit stronger. He had never known that kind of support before. He could never count on his grandmother or his family to be there for him. They would watch him fall and lecture him about his weaknesses, never reaching out to give him a hand up.

And it wasn't until going through that Pensieve did he finally understand. Harry may have gone through worse things, but Remus was right. Looking at his own life through Harry's experiences and comparing the two was just an excuse so that he wouldn't have to face his own thoughts and feelings.
Now that he honestly believed he could get stronger and actually contribute to protecting Harry and stopping Voldemort, he felt ready to start letting go of the past and who he once was. He was ready to break out of the self-destructive pattern, and the first step was going home and facing his grandmother. If he could face her and not lose this newfound enlightenment and conviction, then Neville felt he might actually stand a chance. He might actually have the courage to be in Gryffindor. He might actually be worth Ginny's love. He might be strong enough to be Harry's brother.

He looked over at the bed. Harry - No, it was Shadow now - Regardless, his brother lay sleeping as he had for the past eighteen hours. The dark circles were gone and he looked less pale and strained. "I'm going to do this," he promised softly. "I'm tired of being weak. I really am sick of it. I'm going to try and be the person you and Remus and Ginny think I am. Nothing's stopping me but me, and I'm ready to let myself really try. I'm not going to give up. Not this time. I'm not the same person I was, and if I can change that much already, I can continue to change and get stronger. That's what I'm going to do."

Shadow groaned and cracked open an eye gummy with sleep. "Nev? What time is it?" He rolled over onto his side and faced the desk and his brother.

"Seven in the morning. You've been asleep since about twelve-thirty yesterday."

Shadow groaned painfully and rolled onto his back.

"What?" Neville was instantly worried and he hurried to the bedside. "Are you okay?"

"I really, really, really have to pee."

Neville laughed. "Don't look at me, brother. You're going to have to take care of that yourself."

"Shuddup," Shadow growled playfully and sat up. He rubbed at his eyes and yawned. "Why are you in such a chipper mood anyway?"

"I'm just glad everything worked out." Neville smiled and moved toward the door. "I should let the others know you're awake."

"Let them sleep," Shadow argued, getting to his feet.

"They're already awake. We went to bed when you did and woke up about two this morning, unable to go back to sleep." He disappeared out the door before Shadow could respond.

Grumbling, Shadow went to the bathroom and took care of business. Something was up with Neville, but he didn't have a clue what. He'd figure it out later. Maybe when he wasn't so groggy… And hungry… Starving actually. Finishing, he moved to the door, intending to go to the kitchens for a pre-breakfast snack.

Remus smiled when the door opened under his hand and he found his charge still disheveled with sleep and in his pajamas. "Good. You haven't taken a shower yet."

"Oh no…" Shadow groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Oh yes." Remus gave a wolfish grin. "It's time for your skin treatments. Let me get the bath ready. It will only take me a second."

"But I have to soak for an hour!" Shadow crossed his arms and scowled. "Can't I do that after breakfast?"
"Nope. You're going to Grimmauld Place after breakfast," Remus answered cheerfully. He moved to
the bath and started to fill it with hot water. He upended the seven different potions he carried into
the water and cast a charm that gently stirred them in.

Shadow sighed and watched all this from his position leaning against the door frame. He still didn't
move his arms or remove his frown. He knew he had to be consistent with these damn treatments or
he'd have to start over or worse. By stopping the treatment too early, he could possibly make the
scars resistant to magic, therefore making them incurable, but still… It could be damn inconvenient at
times.

"There you are," Remus said and gestured grandly at the full tub. "It's all ready for you."

"Yeah, yeah," Shadow muttered and jerked his chin impatiently at the door.
Remus laughed and gave him his privacy.

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After breakfast, Shadow met Draco in the sitting room. The blond stood with a casual expression and
a lifted eyebrow, but Shadow had his empathy wide open and he could feel his friend's
dissatisfaction, disappointment, and annoyance. Shadow felt a bit annoyed as well. He wanted the
blond to go with him. He didn't want to just leave him behind, but there wasn't anything he could do
about it.

"I'll see you in Slytherin, Serpentine," he promised.

Draco smiled, cheered by this idea. "You're definitely a Slytherin," he agreed.

"Here." Shadow handed him a rolled up parchment.

"What is it?" Draco asked, taking it.

"It's connected to the master scroll that I have. Our letters will appear automatically on the other
scroll. It used to be Neville's, but I asked him if I could give it to you since he can write me through
Remus and you can't."

Draco nodded and slipped the parchment into his robe pocket. "I see you have your piano back
around your neck."

"Yeah." Shadow touched the small wooden pendant. Why was this so hard? "I can't wait to see what
your Animagus form is. So hurry up and learn it."

"Write me any information you gather about the Death Eaters," Draco responded, ignoring the jab.
"I'll help you make plans. We still have over half a basilisk in the school."

"It's time," Severus said, appearing in the doorway.

Shadow paused at Draco's shoulder and placed his hand there, squeezing lightly.

Draco looked into his friend's mismatched eyes and gave a lopsided smile. He pushed Shadow past
him and watched the teen go. Severus hesitated in the doorway and Draco met his eyes. He didn't
know why his Head of House was looking at him so intensely, but the man turned and walked away
without a word. Draco made a note to himself to watch Severus more closely in the future.

xXxXxXx
Minerva stood at the head of the table in the dining room. Most of the Order was gathered there as well as the children. They looked excited to be included in a meeting. She just hoped they would keep their enthusiasm after she told them her news.

"Professor Snape will be coming here to stay permanently. He has been reinstated as an Order member and holds my trust completely." This was said with a pointed look at Moody and a few others who still considered Severus a Death Eater. "He will be bringing with him his fourteen year old son."

Everyone's eyes went immediately round. The children especially looked shocked. Minerva smiled to herself and waited patiently for the first outcry. She only had to wait ten seconds.

"Son? What's this?" Moody, a scared one-eyed, one-legged, ex-Auror growled with a fierce glare.

"Professor Snape has been a target since the First War when he testified and placed several Death Eaters in Azkaban. Because of this, he kept his relationship with Amalia Ashton private. Very few knew of their marriage until the tragic Death Eater attack two years after the fall of You-Know-Who. Both Amalia and their daughter died. Because of this, Professor Snape decided to remove his son's official records from public record. He placed Shadow under Hogwarts’ protection. Albus monitored Shadow in the Ministry's stead."

"So why is he coming here now?" Emmeline asked, eyes filled with sympathy.

"Shadow is in more danger than ever after the Professor's defense of Albus on the Astronomy Tower. He no longer feels keeping Shadow so far away from help is the best option. He wants Shadow enrolled in Hogwarts where Professor Snape and the teachers can keep an eye on him."

She looked around the room and saw shocked silence on the children's faces. Some of the adults looked the same. Others were more sympathetic and excited about meeting Severus Snape's child. A few looked suspicious and were sneering. She wasn't surprised, but she met those expressions with a hard-eyed stare of her own. Shadow was under her protection. She would not allow any harm to come to the child.

"Now." She shifted her gaze to Hermione and the four youngest Weasleys. "He's grown up pretty isolated. I don't think he's ever been introduced into his peer's society. I'm counting on you to be patient, sensitive, and kind. It's important that you make a good impression. I don't want him to dread coming to Hogwarts."

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione answered quickly, her brown eyes now alight with determination.

Minerva inclined her head. "I'm trusting you. Dismissed."

The four teens got to their feet and hurried from the room, obviously bursting with the need to talk about what they'd just learned.

Minerva settled into her chair and folded her hands. She knew the adults were going to want to question her more thoroughly.

She respected the men and women in the Order. They risked their lives for their world, but she wouldn't tolerate ignorance or prejudice. She couldn't afford to. There was a war coming. They would need everyone they could get. Including Severus Snape. Maybe especially Severus Snape. She would just have to make them see that.

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Severus stepped out of the floo with a face tight with tension, but he relaxed when he found only Minerva standing there waiting. She offered a smile. He gave a little bow and stepped to the side. Minerva stood straight, keeping her excitement and curiosity carefully from her face. The fire flared green and a teenager stepped through.

Shadow wore slacks and a plain white, long-sleeved shirt without wizarding robes. He wore a necklace around his neck, a silver bracelet on his left wrist, and a ring on the first finger of his right hand. The next thing she noticed was his pale skin, very much like Severus’, and then she took in his black curls. They were messily attractive. Minerva estimated he stood about five foot six, and inch or so shorter than Ron. His face was neutral, his stance guarded. Then she looked into his eyes.

"My goodness," she breathed but otherwise controlled her reaction.

The teen had one blue eye, the color of fire burning hot, and the other a lime green. Not the neon lime color of crayons but the actual rich color of the fruit. Both were beautiful, but she couldn't help the slight twist of unease in her gut. She banished it quickly. The old stories were all a bunch of nonsense, anyway.

"Severus, Shadow," she bowed and gave a warm smile. "Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix. You will be safe here."

Severus merely nodded, but Shadow spoke up, politely, saying, "Thank you.” The teen's voice was like his father's, rich and smooth, a good singing voice, but it was a bit higher than Severus'.

"Come. I'll show you to your room and introduce you to the students that are also in residence. I'm sure they would be delighted to give you a tour and answer any questions you may have."

Once the Headmistress' back was turned, Shadow shot his father an amused smirk.

They followed the Headmistress upstairs. She opened the fifth door on the right and revealed a bedroom. It had a desk, a dresser, and a four poster bed. The walls were a red-brown color and the floors a dark wood. The comforter and pillows counteracted the dark theme with their rich deep yellow color, the sheets were white.

"What do you think?" Minerva smiled at the teen.

"It's nice," Shadow answered. He wasn't too concerned about his sleeping quarters. As long as it had a bed, it was fine with him.

"I'm putting you in the next room, Severus."

"That is appreciated, Minerva.” He moved curiously to the next door. It opened into a room identical to Shadow’s except the walls were dark blue and the bed was Slytherin green. He quirked his lips at his colleague, making Minerva laughed.

"Yes. I thought it did suit you." The old witch gestured down the hall and looked to Shadow. "Would you like to meet the others now?"

"That'd be fine," Shadow allowed and shut his door.

"I'll unpack, and then I need to visit the lab," Severus spoke up. "If you need me, I'll most likely be there."

Shadow nodded and followed McGonagall down the hallway. She stopped at the second door from the stairs and he felt a sudden thrill. How were his Gryffindor associates going to react? He was
thinking about telling them the truth, but he had yet come to a decision.

McGonagall knocked and there were a few muffled thuds before Ron opened the door, revealing Hermione, Ginny, and the twins sitting on the bed and at the desk. Ron's eyes went wide, and the others leaned in awkward positions to get a look at him. The twins actually Apparated into the hall.

Shadow spun to face them. Fred and George wore identical smirking grins, but their cocky attitude turned into open-mouthed shock when they caught sight of his eyes.

"Is this him, then?" Ron asked and Shadow turned to face him again. The girls were standing at his shoulders staring at Shadow with great curiosity.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley. This is Shadow Snape," McGonagall said dryly, frowning in disapproval at his attitude. "I thought you five wouldn't mind giving him a tour of the house."

Hermione smiled. "Of course, ma'am."

McGonagall tuned to Shadow. "If you need anything, I am available, Mr. Snape."

"Thank you, ma'am," Shadow said with genuine gratitude and gave her a bow as she left them.

Hermione pushed past Ron and offered her hand. "Hi. I'm Hermione Granger. This is Ron, Ginny, and the twins are Fred and George. They're all Weasleys." She cast her eyes at the usually unflappable twins. "I have no idea what's gotten into them."

"It's my eyes," Shadow answered easily, casting a glance back at the still shocked twins.

"What about 'em?" Ron questioned, then gasped when Shadow met his gaze and opened his eyes wide. "Bloody hell."

"What?" Hermione frowned. "I mean it's odd, but I think it's rather pretty."

"Me, too!" Ginny smiled. "Don't mind them, Shadow. They're a bit thick-headed." She took Shadow by the arm and led him past the twins, going the opposite direction of the stairs. "The first place you got to see is the attic. There's the coolest stuff up there. I hope you don't mind getting a bit dusty, though."

He smiled. "I don't mind."

He didn't really know Ginny all that well. She was a year younger. He hadn't noticed how mature she acted or how quick-witted she was. She looked physically different from the last time he'd seen her, too. It was amazing how much girls could change in just a couple months. Her chest was filling out as well as her curves. Her hair was a bit longer, still thick and dark red. Her eyes were bright with intelligence and humor. Mostly, he was thinking about how he would have an excuse to hang out with Neville if he befriended Ginny now, since she was bound to spend a lot of time with her boyfriend once they returned to school.

Hermione and the boys hung back, talking heatedly about the superstitions that surrounded people with heterochromia. Hermione wanted to know everything about it, of course, while simultaneously scolding them for believing in such nonsense. Eye color had nothing to do with luck, not that she believed in luck in any case. The twins remained silent on that point, but Ron argued heatedly that the superstitions were true, that Shadow might be able to curse them with the Evil Eye or may be a true Seer, unlike Trelawney.

The attic was a huge open floor, the walls tilted at the angle of the roof. Boxes and trunks were
shoved in corners. Some old furniture stood without a single speck of dust, but the floor was covered in it and it floated through the air. Shadow figured the furniture had been charmed to repel dust at some point. The boxes, however, weren't. When Ginny reached into a box and pulled out an old racing broom and an older model of a snitch, they had to cover their mouth and nose to breathe.

"Isn't it amazing? These were top of the line sixty years ago." She grinned as she handed it over. "I found them yesterday, but I wasn't sure if I was allowed to take them, so I put them back. What do you think? Should I keep them?"

"Who do they belong to?" Shadow asked in return. The snitch was interesting. It had three wings instead of two, and they were more like miniature, feathered bird wings instead of the dragonfly-like wings modern snitches sported.

"Well, they belonged to Scorpio Black, I think. He died a long time ago." Ginny shrugged. "The Ministry confiscated all Black properties and assets, but they didn't want this House, so Hogwarts took it. I guess they belong to McGonagall now."

"They really belong to Sirius Black," Fred spoke up, eyes glinting with mischievous mirth since they all knew Sirius was free, innocent, and was once a Marauder.

"The only man to ever escape Azkaban," George added.

"I bet he'd take revenge on anyone…" Fred continued, casually walking deeper into the attic.

"… who dare steal from him. Who knows, maybe…" George matched his brother's pace so that they were slowly circling Shadow and Ginny.

"… he's watching right now. No one knows how he broke free."

"He could be using the house's magic and has been hiding here all this time."

"Just waiting for the perfect moment…"

"… to return to You-Know-Who," George hissed dramatically, making Ginny giggle.

"Fred! George!" Hermione snapped, her eyes flashing with genuine anger.

The twins jumped and looked at her, completely clueless why she had gotten so upset.

"Shadow has been running from the Death Eaters. I hardly think it's funny to make him feel like one could be hiding within reach!"

The twins shared a glance and spoke as one. "Sorry, mate."

"We didn't mean to frighten you." George bowed humbly. "We just wanted to pick on our dear sister a bit."

"I shall kill myself in shame." Fred lifted a lamp and plunged it dramatically at his stomach.

"Knock it off." Ron glared. He shoved George in the arm. "You two are bloody annoying."

"Why don't you show me the rest of the house? We can come back here later when we have more time," Shadow suggested. He turned for the ladder and began to climb down.

"Look what you did," he heard Hermione hiss. "Not everyone knows what we know about Sirius."
Smiling, Shadow shook his head.

Ginny was the first down the ladder after him. She smiled sheepishly and apologized. He waved it off, but stopped in mid-gesture when he realized that he had picked up Severus's mannerisms. Then he continued it, knowing it would look weird if he didn't; though he felt a bit uneasy about how much Severus was influencing him.

They toured the house. There were ten bedrooms upstairs and four bathrooms. On the first floor, there was a library, a study, two sitting rooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. The basement level was a large potions lab and cellar. Shadow got to see it when he and Ginny went down to tell Severus that dinner was being served.

Ginny looked expectantly at Shadow, so he stepped forward and called out, "Father."

Severus lifted his head from the potion he was stirring.

"Dinner," Shadow explained shortly, a half-smile quirking his lips. He knew Severus would much rather brew, but the man wasn't about to abandon him to the Order without back up.

Severus sighed and cast a stasis spell at the cauldron and then spelled his hands clean. "Shall we?" he asked darkly, gesturing back up the stairs. He followed the teens up. "How was your day?"

"Interesting. This house is huge," Shadow answered.

"It is that," Severus agreed. "I hope you have been cautious."

"I have." Twice he had sensed Dark Arts protections on certain items in the house. He had been very careful to stay clear of those.

"Good."

They entered the dinning room.

Usually many of the Order members missed meals, but tonight the dinning room table was full. It seemed many wanted to get a good look at Severus's son. Up until this point, Shadow had carefully closed off his empathy, but he cracked it open now.

Curiosity, pity, and dark suspicion were the strongest emotions he could sense. The suspicion was coming strongest from Moody, and then a tall, bald, black man, and finally an old man with watery blue eyes. Pity came strongest from a woman with an emerald green shawl and it was as unwelcome as the suspicion.

To distract himself from the harsh emotional energies coming from the adults, he turned to quickly read the teens. The twins were bright with anticipation, knowing the dinner could quickly become explosive. Ginny was worried and defensive on his behalf. Hermione was curious and nervous. Ron was apprehensive, guarded, and distrustful.

Shadow made his face completely blank and stood at the empty seat next to Severus's. He inclined his head as McGonagall gestured at everyone around the table to introduce them. As he met the eyes of each person named, there was an identical spike of shock and wariness either quickly buried or shrugged off when they caught a good look at his eyes. He wished his eyes were normal, wished he didn't cause that reaction, but he knew wishes like that were worthless. He'd have to deal with it and the reaction his eyes would always evoke.

They were hardly seated before Moody growled out, "So where has your father been keeping you all
these years, boy?"

"Moody." McGonagall frowned warningly. "We are about to eat. You know the rules."

The old Auror didn't turn to face her or respond. He kept his eyes pinned to the curly-haired teen. Shadow met the fearsome gaze impassively and said nothing. Mrs. Weasley came out with large dishes of food hovering around her. With a deft flick of her wand, she had it laid out on the table in no time.

"I hope I made enough." She smiled cheerfully and cast a glance Shadow's way. "Make sure you get enough to eat, honey. You look a little peaky."

Severus reached for some potatoes. "May I serve you, Auror Moody?"

"Do you think me stupid?" Moody snarled. "You probably poisoned it, Death Eater."

"Alastor!" McGonagall barked. "Leave this table at once!"

Shadow shifted his eyes to his Headmistress, surprised at her tone. He had never before heard her so fierce. And, indeed, her eyes were bright and her face was tight with rage. Mood growled and pushed away from the table before stomping loudly out of the room.

"Don't mind him, Shadow. He's a bit crazy," Ginny spoke up, trying to ease the tension.

"Yeah, we all call him…" George added his voice.

"… Mad-Eye Moody!" Fred exclaimed. "Maybe we should change it to Perv-Eye Moody."

"Do you think he can see through girl's clothes?" George grinned lasciviously.

"Boys!" Mrs. Weasley scolded hotly, glaring fiercely at them. "You'll keep a civil tongue at the table."

Everyone settled down a bit after that. Soft murmurings of conversation hummed as plates began to be filled and emptied. Emmeline was the next to address Shadow, and it was after the twins had already finished one plate and were in the process of getting seconds.

"How do you like it, dear? Molly is a very fine cook."

"It's very good." Shadow smiled at her. "Especially the gravy."

Molly beamed at him happily. "Have some more, sweetheart."

"Do you have very many home-cooked meals at home?" Shacklebolt asked blandly.

Shadow shrugged. "I know how to cook simple meals, but most of my meals were made by our elf, Omi."

"You must have been very lonely," Emmeline said disapprovingly, eyes glancing at Severus.

"Not really. I've kept busy." Shadow forced a smile at the annoying witch.

"I'm sure," Shacklebolt muttered darkly.

"So, Diggle," Severus spoke to an elderly man. "Your eldest grandchild is coming to Hogwarts this year, is she not? Do you think she will have some aptitude for Potions?"
“Well…” Diggle blinked in startlement at being addressed, but he quickly went into a fond description of his granddaughter.

Shadow slowly relaxed, although he was puzzled. Out of the twelve people sitting at the table, he could only sense strong power from Severus, McGonagall, and Shacklebolt. This was the core of the Order of the Phoenix? He was aware there were an unknown amount of agents in the field and could only hope they were more capable and impressive than those he was seeing now.

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Hey. You there? Shadow wrote. Dinner had finally ended and he had quickly excused himself to the comfort of his room. Now he sat on his bed, his back to the headboard, and his spelled parchment across his lap.

Where else would I be? Draco wrote back.

Shadow felt an uncontrollable smile spread across his face. The response was so Draco-like that he could literally hear his friend's voice in his head. He had a fond flashback of the careful dance of letters between them last summer.

Good. I'm in need of Slytherin conversation.

I'm sure. The occupants of that house must be dreadful conversationalists.

You can say that. Shadow laughed.

How was the reception?

Mixed. Shacklebolt, Diggle, and Moody are against Severus and therefore suspicious of me. Vance pities me, which may be worse, but McGonagall is fully on my side. As are the Weasleys, except for Ron who believes the superstitions about my eyes.

How was that by the way?

They freaked everyone out. Some brushed their unease off, but others just buried it, Shadow admitted.

I'm sorry. I know you hate the attention.

I wanted your opinion, he wrote, changing the subject.

Who do you want to reveal your identity to? Draco wrote back, knowing what was coming.

Shadow shook his head, amused. The twins. They've proven their loyalty and, I don't know whether it's because they are a year older than us, but they've never turned their backs on me like Ron and Hermione have. They could come in handy and they're clever, but they are pranksters. How safe are secrets with them really, do you think?

There was a short pause before Draco responded, I don't know them as well as you, Shadow. I can't tell you that, but if you think they will be more useful to you in the know, then you should tell them. Certainly they will do things for Harry that they won't do for Shadow. Their prankster reputations is also a benefit in that if they do tell, they might not be believed.

True. Shadow tapped the quill against his lips.

If they do betray you, we would make them regret it.
Shadow laughed again. No one else made him relax so completely. Severus was absolutely trustworthy but too watchful, whereas Draco was self-absorbed enough that Shadow never felt on the spot with him. Neville was just as trustworthy, but Shadow feared to show his brother the darkness of his Slytherin side. Draco not only accepted his dark side, he also showed a dark side of his own.

*Then I've decided,* he wrote. *I'll let you know tomorrow how it goes.*

*Luck,* Draco wrote in answer.

Shadow rolled up the parchment and put it in the nightstand drawer, spelling it locked with the strongest charm he knew. The house sounded quiet. Opening the door revealed an empty hallway. There was light coming out from under the girls’ room as well as the twins’, but Ron's room was dark. He hoped the redhead was with the girls as he knocked softly on the twins’ door.

George opened it. He and his twin were in their pajamas, but the beds weren't pulled down down yet. The desk in the corner was scattered with papers and Shadow suspected they had been hunched over it, plotting together, before his knock interrupted them. Ron wasn't in the room.

"Yes?" George frowned, suspicion growing in his eyes.

"Can we help you?" Fred asked, crossing his arms and frowning.

"I need to talk to you. Can I come in?" Shadow didn't wait for an answer. He walked into the room and shut the door behind him.

The twins shared a glance and then broke out into almost threatening grins. "What is the matter, little Snape?" - "You can tell us anything. We'll help you out of any trouble."

The twins guided him to the bed and fawned over him. Shadow smiled at them and let them fuss. He wanted to have their whole attention, so letting them burn off nervous energy was in his best interest. After a few minutes of them offering to get him a drink and warmer socks, they finally fell silent and looked at him expectantly.

"I'm about to tell you a secret. A secret that you must not repeat. To anyone. Ever," he said seriously, knowing it would draw them in further.

Predictably, the twins almost started drooling and leaned in toward him.

"We'll never speak a word…” - “… of your secret. It will be treated…” - “… as valuable as our own lives."

Shadow nodded. He took a deep breath and said, "I'm someone else as well as Shadow Snape. I have a second name. It's important that no one knows what it is, but I want you to know because I think you can help me."

The twins were not stupid. They shared another look and their excitement dampened into uneasiness as well as tentative hope.

"I'm also Harry Potter. Shadow's history is fabricated, but it's not a complete lie. Severus adopted me this summer and we went through the Adoption Ritual that shared his blood with mine."

"What about your scar?" Fred asked doubtfully.

"Moved to my chest to keep it hidden," Shadow answered and then explained everything that had
happened since he woke up that summer. He left out all mention of Neville and Draco, though he did mention Remus and Sirius. By the time he finished, the twins sat on the floor at his feet just gaping at him.

"Why did they move it to your chest? Why not find a way to move it into your hair?" George asked, dismay written across his features.

"That procedure sounds really risky," Fred nodded in complete agreement.

"We couldn't just move it into my hair." Shadow shook his head. "As you know, there is no way of removing a curse-scar. They resist all magic. Technically, we didn't move the scar. We created an environment where it moved itself. Can you think of a situation that would convince the scar to move somewhere else on my head than where it was?"

"You said you needed to be healed after what happened."

"What did happen?"

"I don't know," he invented on the spot. "It was bad enough that I've blocked it out completely. All I know is that I came back torn to shreds and almost dead. The evidence points to extreme torture."

The twins paled.

Shadow smiled to reassure them. "Don't worry about it. Like I said. I don't remember a thing."

"Still, Harry…"

"… or Shadow," Fred interrupted, cutting a look at his twin.

"Shadow," George corrected with an apologetic inclination of his head. "That's nothing to be taken lightly."

"Though we are kings at taking everything lightly." Fred grinned, breaking the heavy atmosphere.

George mirrored his expression and stood gracefully, putting a hand on Shadow's shoulder. "Your secret is safe with us."

"Really. It is." Fred nodded, standing and squeezing Shadow's other shoulder. "We're with you all the way, mate."

"Why?" he asked, sensing nothing but sincerity from the twins.

George shrugged. "Because we said so."

There wasn't one single reason for their loyalty. It had come on slowly. It grew out of their sense of protectiveness for the small, green-eyed Gryffindor they had suspected of being abused. They had started watching him and respected Harry’s intelligence and magical strength as well as his ability to think for himself. The emotional attachment that had crept up on them was strong and undeniable.

"Cool new eyes, by the way." Fred grinned.

"The change would be totally worth it for those alone." George went over to the desk and grabbed a handful of papers.

Fred explained them. "We're trying to figure out how to get the same effect with a charm or maybe a potion. We could make one of our eyes green so we match yours or we could go one brown."
George bounced on his feet excitedly. "I want one brown, one green."

"Maybe I could do that to make my eyes match." Shadow took the papers and scanned them thoughtfully.

"Doesn't work for long and it can be detected."

"The eyes are delicate. Very delicate."

"Could make someone blind on accident," Fred said thoughtfully, tapping his chin.

"Or change the whites of the eyes instead of the iris." George obviously thought that side-effect might actually be cool.

"Maybe even change the pupil."

"And why do you want to change your eyes, anyway?"

"They rock!"

Shadow snorted. He stood and handed back the papers. "Well, I'll let you two mad geniuses figure it out. I'm off to bed. Thanks for keeping my secret."

The twins bowed deeply and escorted him back to his room, acting like knightly guards or something. Shadow laughed and shut the door to them pushing each other and fighting over the first to wish him good night. Shaking his head, he changed into his nightclothes. The twins were still a mystery, but he figured that they would always be and he'd just have to get use to it.

_August 7th_

_very early Sunday morning_

The stone hallway was dark and cold. The gentle slap, slap, of bare feet echoed softly. Breathing hard with anticipation, he could almost hear the ecstatic beat of his heart as the chained stone door loomed closer. As before, lust rose in him and he caressed the door possessively. Demon's chill laughter answered as before, but this time, it wasn't the only response.

Dark red blood welled up in the cracks that outlined the door. The copper smell filled his nose with rot and death. Caution seeped in through his burning hot desire to throw open this door and possess what lay inside. Demon was like a fire. He must be handled carefully or it could burn him. But, oh yes, he would handle Demon. He would make Demon into the perfect weapon and nothing would stop him or hurt him again.

As the blood oozed down and covered the cold stone surface and pooled around the bottom, he hungrily stepped up to the door and caught the warm fluid on his first two fingers. The silkiness and heat of the liquid on his skin made him shiver with ecstasy.

Suddenly, the blood flared up with a bright red flash and blinded him. He stumbled back, but when he opened his eyes he was no longer in the cool, dark, stone corridor. He was in an ugly little house. He had no time to really take it in. Demon walked through the front door, his head was bowed in a mockery of humility. He almost looked unassuming in the small human body he wore.

Demon walked calmly down a narrow hallway and into the kitchen. Pots clattered to the floor as a thin woman screamed. At first, the shout was angry, but it quickly filled with terror as Demon lifted his head and revealed his cruel, blazing, hungry eyes. Demon stepped forward, his mouth opening
into a horrific grin that had nothing of happiness or humor in it.

The woman was yanked forward and spread belly down on the table. Then the real show began. A powerful display of the Darkest magics. Cold, high laughter rang in his ears throughout the agonizing and meticulous torture playing out before him. And when that was done, Demon walked calmly into the hallway trailing footsteps of blood.

On the stairs, Demon stood still and patient, eyes gleaming in his blood-splattered face. They didn't have to wait long before a fat man entered the house. Demon lifted a hand and the bellowing man was floating off the ground and trailing after like a grotesque balloon.

Upstairs, they entered the first bedroom on the right. What happened with the woman looked playful compared to what followed. And he realized that these memories were not only given to him as a promise of power, but also as a chilling warning.

For a bright moment, fear overpowered his hunger to possess this force, and he fled…

… Shadow sat up with a gasp that quickly turned into something else. He turned so that his head hung over the edge of the bed and vomited. The smell made him retch again. Sweating, whimpering, he crawled away to the other side of the bed.

The horror of seeing his aunt and uncle being unraveled while still horrifically alive flashed before his burning eyes. He could hardly breathe, his teeth were beginning to chatter, and he could only vaguely feel his fingers and toes. His chest was burning and he wondered hysterically if he were having a heart attack.

He was going into shock. His thoughts were jumping all over the place. Back to the dream, back to the present, back to the mental horror show. He knew there were breathing exercises that could calm him. He could do Occlumency. Do something to stop the panic and horror from choking him, but he couldn't think of how to do any of the things he knew the names of.

Stumbling, swallowing back bile and screams, he made his way clumsily across the room and into the hall. Thank God safety was only one door away. He collapsed to his knees, wanting to cry or run or lash out, anything to block out the images seared into the back of his eyes, but he managed to pull himself back from the edge just long enough to pound on the door.

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Severus woke instantly. He yanked up his robe and flung it on over his nightclothes as he pulled open his door. Only his quick reflexes allowed him to catch his son before he fell. He grabbed the teen, allowing Shadow to rest most of his weight on him, but even still Shadow was shaking so badly they could hardly make it to his bed before Shadow collapsed again.

"Breathe. Follow me," Severus said firmly and began taking deep slow breaths.

Shadow shivered against his father's hands, braced against his shoulders. Slowly his tears and the nausea lessened enough for Severus to stand and fetch some potion. Shadow downed the Calming Draught without hesitating. It blessedly cooled his racing thoughts and dampened his emotions.

"Just keep breathing," Severus murmured, rubbing circles on the teen's back.

He said nothing about the shirt Shadow wore being damp with sweat. He wanted to. He wanted to demand an explanation for his son's distress, but it would do no good to get Shadow worked up again. He assumed there was no immediate crisis. Surely Shadow would have said something before now, had that been the case. So Severus had room to be patient and careful.
"I saw it… In my dream…” Shadow whispered hoarsely. He lifted his eyes, bright with torment, and took refuge in the calm, accepting expression on Severus’s face. "I saw Demon torture them."

Severus tensed and gently cupped his son's face in his hands. "Shadow. Let me into your mind. I'm going to check your barriers."

Shadow shivered. He didn't want to be in his own head, let alone let someone else in there. It felt like his head was swishing with blood that was going to spill over at any second. But he opened his eyes and let Severus slip past his shaken barriers.

Severus thought he was familiar with water landscapes, his own mind was shaped as the surface of the ocean, thoughts and memories revealed as the folds of the waves that constantly tossed and churned, protecting them from being read. Swimming in the ocean of Shadow’s mind wasn’t at all similar. Tall seaweed and kelp blocked his view and darting fishes of all shapes and sizes distracted his eyes. But he was a master Legimens and he gently pushed past all this surface interference.

He dove deep down toward the dark ocean floor where light didn't reach. He created his own light and kept going when it was so dark and deep that he was no longer sure he was in an ocean. It seemed more like a black hole of nothingness. Just when he was about to turn back, he saw it. It looked like storm shutters over a cellar. Severus knew that within that cellar would stand two more doors; one made of stone leading to Demon and the other a small cupboard door leading to Boy.

Heavy steel chains and three padlocks secured the cellar door shut. They looked steady and intact. He ran his mental fingers over every link and over every lock and found no weaknesses. Deeply unhappy, he began to rise from the deep well, swam back through the ocean, and broke through the surface into air.

Severus closed his eyes and rubbed at them, easing away the strain. He was back in his bedroom at Headquarters. Shadow was sitting before him, still tense and shaken, but he had nothing he could tell the teen. He had no reassurances to give. Severus had no idea why Demon's memories were bleeding into Shadow's mind. It didn't seem possible.

"The alters are secured. There are no breaks in your defenses."

Shadow wrapped his arms around his chest and closed his eyes tight. "That's good. Right?"

"I see no reason why you should be dreaming Demon's memories." Severus put his hand gently on the teen's knee. "Do you think you can describe what you saw in detail?"

Shadow shook his head sharply once. There was no way he could talk about it. No way did he want to see it yet again. No. He wouldn't.

"Very well," Severus accepted. "I recommend you play some piano. Focus your thoughts on something completely different. Perhaps you will feel more like talking tomorrow."

Shadow doubted that very much. Standing, he made his way to the door, knowing Severus's dark eyes were still on him. He felt fragile and brittle. It wasn't a feeling that made him at all happy. He wanted Severus to come with him, but he couldn't bring himself to ask for his company either. It was too great a weakness.

Shadow’s hand hesitated on the doorknob when Severus spoke up behind him. "I need to make a few notes in the Potions Journal that arrived a few days ago. Do you mind if I meet you in the sitting room? I can construct a silencing ward so that your playing won't disturb anyone else in the house."

Shadow nodded, greatly relieved he wouldn’t be alone and embarrassed that he needed his father.
near. He hurried back to his room, where he quickly cleaned up the mess he made by being sick on the floor and changed into clean clothes. He chose dark blue jeans and a smoky grey sweater.

Severus was waiting for him when he came out. He was dressed, as always, all in black, his teaching robes hanging open. The familiarity of the attire and the man made something tight in Shadow’s chest relax. He was safe. Nothing was wrong. He just hoped the piano would help him believe that.

He played for hours while Severus sat silently with him, just listening to the chaotic spill of melody that poured from Shadow’s restless fingers. Shadow didn’t stop until Ginny walked in, sleepily rubbing her eyes. She stopped in shock, her mouth falling open, when she was suddenly surrounded by the loud and resonant piano song.

"Shadow! That was beautiful! I didn't know you knew how to play."

Tired but not at all tempted to sleep, Shadow smiled at her. "I enjoy it."

"Do you play, too, Professor?" Ginny asked, looking at Severus like she had never seen him before.

"No, but his mother did," Severus answered.

Shadow smiled with a deep pang of sadness. His father spoke the complete truth. Lily had played, but so had Amalia. He remembered seeing in the Pensieve Severus sitting in a chair, holding a three month old Tabby, while Amalia laughed and played a simple country song. She had loved music and dancing. Shadow wished he had the chance to play with her.

"Can I hear you play something?" Ginny’s voice broke through his thoughts.

He gently lowered the lid to the keys. "I'm actually kind of tired. Maybe some other time." Shadow stood and returned the piano to his necklace and put it back around his neck.

Ginny laughed in delight. "I had wondered where a piano had suddenly come from. That's an awesome bit of magic!"

Shadow smiled. "Thank you. My father did it for me."

Severus stood and adjusted his robe. Shadow could feel his embarrassment and pleasure. "I believe it is about time for breakfast. Shall we?"

Shadow grinned at Ginny and she politely hid a giggle behind her hand.

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After breakfast, Severus cornered Shadow in a hallway before he could slip away. "I was wondering if you felt more able to discuss your dream."

"No." Shadow moved to push past his father, but the man grabbed his arm gently.

Shadow pulled it out of his grasp and glared, crossing his arms defensively across his chest.

Severus was insistent. "I am concerned. Dreams usually foretell the merging of your conscious mind and the alter in question."

"That's not going to happen," the teen answered with steely determination. "Even if by some twisted unconscious desire I were trying to merge, it would never happen."

"Why?" Severus asked, taken aback by the passionate response.
"Because." Shadow turned his face away, his fists clinched, the line of his jaw tense. "I would still have to consciously embrace all that Demon is. I won't. Ever."

Severus had no choice but to let his son go. He said nothing, but his eyes were still dark with worry. He wasn't sure what to do, but he'd have to come up with a solution quickly. After all, Shadow may feel that way now, but he had also felt that way about Kit and they had merged long ago.

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"Shadow!" Fred greeted when the teen found them alone in the potions lab.

"I need your help," he said seriously and the twins were instantly attentive. "I need you to help me keep tabs on Moody, Diggle, and Shacklebolt. They have it out for my father."

George blinked. "How do you know?"

"Or do we want to know?" Fred asked slyly.

Shadow laughed "Let me keep some secrets."

"Sure thing, mate." Fred wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"The trouble is Moody's eye, right?" Shadow asked. "It would sense any magical monitoring device. I bet not even your Extendable Ears pass when he's in the room."

"They don't," Fred agreed.

"But sometimes he lets them stay," George added.

"He approves 'constant vigilance', after all."

"I think he thinks we should be more informed than we are."

"That's interesting." Shadow ran his hands through his curls, thinking. "In any case, we need to know what he's doing when he doesn't want you to hear. That's why I was thinking something Muggle. That eye wouldn't sense anything wrong if it isn't magical."

"But electronics don't work well in places with a lot of magic," Fred protested.

"That's where I need your help," Shadow leaned forward. "I need you to help me figure out a way to get electronic devices to work here, without doing anything magical to them. I think it can be done."

"Nothing is impossible," George agreed with a grin.

"We love a challenge." Fred laughed, putting an arm around his twin. "Leave it to us."

"I'll get you the Muggle stuff later today," Shadow promised.

"How? They won't let you leave," Fred questioned.

"Let's just say I know a dog or two who will help."

Fred and George shared a look and then burst into laughter. They hugged the surprised teen and said together, "This is going to be a beautiful partnership."

August 8th
Monday

Neville woke and smiled at the summer sun that was pouring in through his window. That was the one good thing about coming home. He got to work outside more freely. Flinging his bed-covers back, he got dressed in some clothes he put aside for gardening. He found his grandmother and uncle already at the breakfast table.

The Longbottom matriarch frowned deeply. "Go upstairs and put some decent clothes on, young man. I will not have you walking around in rags. The Longbottoms are not vagabonds. Your mother would be appalled."

Throughout the tirade, Neville had calmly walked to the table and took a seat.

Augusta fell silent with shock, her face tightening with outrage.

"If you had asked, I would have explained that I was going to work out in the garden today and perhaps put into use some of the techniques I learned at the Institute. I didn't want to get my nice things dirty." He turned to look at the old man who had begun chuckling at the confrontation. "By the way, thank you for the flower you sent me for my birthday, Uncle Algie. It's fascinating and I've already begun studying it."

"Might as well put your only talent to use," Algie cackled.

Neville nodded, saying nothing to the backhanded compliment.

After that, breakfast was an unusually silent affair. Neville couldn't help but think it was an improvement. This was his second day being home, and he wondered when his grandmother was going to realize he wasn't going to let her beat him down anymore. He hoped she figured it out soon because it was getting harder to stay calm in the face of her non-ceasing jabs. Maybe he would write Ginny while he was outside. That always made him feel better.

August 9th

Tuesday

Shadow had been gone for only three days and Draco already felt like he was going to go mad with boredom. He could only spend so many hours over books and in studies.

"Are you listening?" Sirius demanded, scowling. He was tense as well. He had never been the studious type and they had been putting in about ten hours a day or more in the library. Going into the Muggle village to get what Shadow needed had been a nice change of pace, but it wasn't enough to ease most of his restlessness.

"I need a break." Draco stood up and pushed away from the table.

"What's the matter, Little Malfoy?" Sirius taunted with a grin. "Shocked that you actually have to work for something for once in your pampered life?"

Draco spun around, his grey eyes on fire. "You don't know the first thing about who I am, Black. I suggest you keep your mouth shut unless you want to flaunt what an ignorant fleabag you really are."

Sirius growled and cast a spell that would turn Draco's hair red with gold stripes. Draco dodged behind a bookcase, pushed some books off the shelf so he could aim at Sirius from behind cover, and cast a Babbling Hex at him. Sirius shielded and flipped over the table, dodging behind his own
bookcase and copying Draco's position.

The blond stopped and laughed. "I don't know about you, Black, but we should take this to the dueling room. Severus will skin us alive if we damage his precious books."

Sirius laughed in return and bolted for the door, determined to get to the dueling room first and gain the upper hand. Draco cried out in outrage and lit after him, protesting that Gryffindor's weren't allowed to cheat.

"You're gonna lose a lot more duels than you win if you hold your enemies to preset behavioral patterns," Sirius lectured. "Strip your opponent from all titles and categories. Once we cross wands, I am no longer a Gryffindor, a Marauder, a Black, or an ex-con. I am merely a man and you better observe, adapt, and respond to the strategies that you see in the moment as if nothing else exists outside the duel. Now learn from the master."

The last was said as Sirius flung open the door and sprinted across the dueling room, jumped on the slightly raised platform, and claimed the higher ground. As soon as Draco stepped through the door, he was under attack.

Draco rolled forward, putting up shields. Sirius's third spell made them shatter and he was hogtied in seconds. Laughing in delight, Sirius let the snarling Slytherin go. Draco was on his feet in the same moment and the duel continued.

They fought against each other ruthlessly. Draco used all the spells in his arsenal except for the most deadly - This was just practice, after all - and Sirius did the same.

"We should do this everyday," Sirius panted. He was laying on his back, half off the mat in the center of the room, covered in sweat and his lungs burning. He hadn't been happier in days.

"I agree."

Draco wasn't as undignified as the mutt who was sprawled on the floor. Instead, he was seated on the edge of the platform. He was just as tired and his whole body ached from muscle strain, but mostly he was annoyed. Sirius had incapacitated him seven times when Draco had only returned the favor twice. It was intolerable. He obviously needed to improve his dueling skills.

Chapter end.
Remus arrived back at Headquarters feeling glad to be back. Minerva had set him out on an errand for her and only now had he completed it. He found her in the study she had claimed as her office. She looked up and smiled, but her face was tired, her eyes dark.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked worriedly as he hurried forward.

"Looking bad, am I?" She gave a tired laugh. "Nothing's the matter. Except for the fact that the teens have all willingly been working with Severus down in the potions lab. I dread what they are doing, especially with the twins involved." She leaned back in her chair and rubbed at her eyes. "And the dementors were freed from Azkaban, the work of the Death Eaters no doubt, and breeding across Europe. The Foreign Ministers are not happy, but it does get Fudge off our backs, as well as Severus', for the time being. But the biggest blow is that Macleod Vance, the agent that gave the most detailed reports on the Death Eaters, has been killed. Emmeline is devastated."

"I'm so sorry," Remus said sadly. It was always hard to hear of the deaths the war produced. "I never met him."

"He was Emmeline's nephew, only twenty-five." Minerva sighed, covering her eyes again.

"I brought the books you need," Remus offered, wishing he could do more for her. "I also took the Ministry exam to update my teaching license. I'll be able to take back the History of Magic class this year."

"That's excellent news, Remus." She smiled at him, life coming back into her eyes. "And the other position? Have you thought about it?"

"I have." He inclined his head, his amber eyes sparkling. "I would be honored to accept the position as Head of Gryffindor House in your stead."

"Thank you, Remus." Minerva stood and came around the desk to hug him. "I would trust you above anyone else to lead our House well."

He returned the hug easily.

"Now." She stepped back and led him to the kitchen. "Are you hungry? I'm sure Molly has something for you to snack on."

Remus laughed. Molly was indeed in the kitchen, working with Ginny preparing lunch. The four of them had tea together, talking of simple things. When they finished their cookies, Minerva rose to return to her office, leaving him with one more assignment. She wanted him to write up an article to be sent to the *Daily Prophet* instructing the populace on how to defend themselves against the wild dementors.

Alone, Remus made his way through Headquarters, looking for Severus and Shadow. He found them in the lab. It wasn't hard to recognize the strong smell of the Animagus Revealing Potion. Shadow, however, was working on something different with Severus. It looked like the potion they were to give Shadow in case of a seizure.
"Moony!" the twins cried out together in welcome.

"Attend your potion!" Severus snapped. "It's critical you stir exactly thirteen times."

The twins obediently returned their full attention to their cauldrons.

Remus smiled and could see why Minerva would be worried. She had no idea why the teens thought the potion was so important, and their meek obedience was disturbing without that explanation. He let them be, promising to see them at lunch. He might as well get started on the article for the paper.

It wasn't until after lunch that Remus got Shadow alone. The teen looked pale, but otherwise he seemed healthy. He cast a few discreet diagnostic tests to be sure. They came back within acceptable ranges.

"How are you?" he asked, hugging the youth.

"Fine." Shadow smiled. "I hear Draco and Sirius are in a dueling war."

"They are." Remus laughed. "I saw them yesterday and Sirius had two black eyes, while Draco had his lips and nails charmed scarlet. The blond was quite upset at not being able to charm them back to their normal colors."

Shadow laughed. "Draco didn't mention that."

"I took pictures." Remus winked.

"Can I see them?" he asked eagerly, eyes bright with mirth and possible plans of blackmail.

"As soon as I develop them. So tell me what you've been up to?"

"Well, I hang out with Ginny and the twins mostly when I'm not being tested by the professors to see what level I'm at. Today is my Potion exam." Shadow moved to sit on the couch and Remus sat across from him.

"How are the tests going?"

"Good." Shadow shrugged. "I decided to do the best I could on them. I thought it would be more suspicious if I was under my age group than if I were above it. I have supposedly been homeschooled with Severus' expectations all my life."

Remus chuckled. "True."

"I told the twins who I was," the teen added unexpectedly.

"How did they take it?" Remus asked, not batting an eye.

"Very good. They won't tell anyone and they've promised to help me."

"What about Hermione and Ron?"

Shadow sighed. "I'm not sure I want them to know. I still talk to Hermione, but I've been kind of distant. I'm afraid she'll figure out that I was Harry. She's smart like that. Ron, on the other hand, doesn't trust me. He still doesn't like Severus, though he's not suspicious of his loyalties anymore, and he believes the superstitions about my eyes. It makes him tense and nervous around me, so he mostly avoids my company. And he's not the only one. Several Order members feel the same suspicion. Diggle thinks I'm contagious or something the way he stares and always makes sure to
stand on the other side of the room."

"Don't worry about it," Remus soothed. "Your friends will come around."

Minerva chose that moment to walk in and unknowingly broke the privacy wards Remus had cast to keep anyone from overhearing their conversation. She smiled at them sitting together and the obvious relaxation in Shadow's body language. "I see you've met our famous Shadow Snape."

"Famous?" Remus asked, eyeing the teen.

"He's quite the academic prodigy. He's at a sixth or fifth year level in some of the classes we've tested him in. I was wondering if you would be so kind as to test him in History as well?"

"Of course," he agreed. "But does this mean he's going to be taking classes with the fifth and sixth years?"

"He'll room with his year mates but yes. I was thinking of arranging the class schedules so that he could attend the classes he needs at the level he is currently at. I don't believe making him sit in on classes where he is already capable would be fair." Minerva looked closely at Shadow. "You wouldn't mind, would you? Attending classes where the students will be older than you? They might not even be of your House."

"I'll be fine. It's better than learning stuff I already know." Shadow smiled at her in reassurance. "Besides, I like the idea of getting to know people from all the Houses. The students here are Gryffindor, and it would be nice to have some classes with them."

Minerva lifted her eyebrow archly. "Don't be too sure that you won't be a Gryffindor yourself, young man. I see a lot of bravery in you."

Shadow smiled at her, secrets in his eyes. "I guess we'll see in September."

**Thursday**

Severus looked around with crystal clarity. He hadn't been this still inside since he was an active spy. His thoughts - the constant mental chatter - were suppressed. His mind was operating at a highly perceptive and reactive level. It was a mindset very much attuned to the immediate present.

When he was spying, he'd go quiet inside like this and it would allow him to be able to give minutely detailed reports to Dumbledore, allowing the old man to act wisely. However, there were costs to maintaining such an acute mental state. One of them was that instead of his normal six hours of sleep at night, he needed nine. It also weakened his ability to consider long term effects or plans, as well as muting his emotions to almost nothing.

You'd think with everything that was happening, he'd need to be able to plan ahead and strategize, that it would be a large mistake to enter this kind of mindset now, but Severus had already made as much future plans as he could with what he knew. He was already prepared for the most immediate challenges the future held for him, which was mainly the trial and revealing Shadow at the Ministry tomorrow.

What he really needed right now was information. Information that could help him plan for the future and Shadow's safety. And, perhaps most importantly, he needed to better understand the changes in his son's still-fractured mind in order to know the best step to take toward healing him. So Severus had retreated and stilled his mind and self-awareness, virtually flooding his mind with outside stimulus and clearer perceptions of those around him, including his son. It was the fourth day of such detailed observation and he had a wealth of material to consider tonight when he relaxed back to a
more normal awareness.

For now, he stood on Diagon Alley with Shadow at his side. It was the second week in August, Hogwarts started soon, and many of the shoppers were families with school-age children. He noticed Shadow looking slightly down. It was a posture of shyness and yet Shadow contradicted that impression by striding along confidently, his shoulders straight. The overall effect was one of politeness, perhaps, instead of timidity. Severus took this all in and understanding shimmered to the surface of his mind.

This allows him to hide his eyes, as well as encourages people to ignore him.

Noting this, Severus continued down the street. Most people didn't glance at them. Those that did, noted them and continued on. Only two people lingered to watch them pass. One of these was Cassandra Pucey, a soon to be 6th year Slytherin.

She was tall and slender with light brown eyes and long, curly auburn hair. She would have been considered beautiful if her face wasn't always so steely. Her lips were always tight and slightly turned down at the corners and her light eyes were bright with calculation. She was ambitious and ruthless, two Slytherin qualities, but she lacked the third: deviousness. She did not possess the capacity to hide her intent behind the many masks Slytherins wore to beguile allies and enemies alike.

Severus felt her eyes on him; he felt her eyes on Shadow. He could almost see her thoughts, so readable were her eyes to him in this state. First, she realized she didn't recognize Shadow as a student at Hogwarts. Second, she noted their similarities. Then she started speculating, calculating, going through lists in her head of people who may know about the Snapes. Severus let her speculate and past by without word or glance of acknowledgement. She was not a threat. Not yet. As far as he knew, her family was still neutral in this War.

The second was none other than Neville Longbottom. The teen seemed to have grown another half-inch and had lost even more weight as his extra baby-fat was finally being put to use during a rapid growth spurt. Now he stood at least five feet and ten inches tall; four whole inches taller than Shadow.

Severus watched as Longbottom's eyes widened in happy surprise, his generous mouth pulling into a smile. Shadow didn't slow or acknowledge the other teen and Neville tensed. Severus looked for hurt, but the Gryffindor had merely realized he was not supposed to know Shadow yet. He turned away and hurried after his grandmother, not looking back.

Finally, they reached their destination: Olivander's Wand Shop. The door made no sound as he pushed it open and held it for Shadow to pass. The round shop was dusty and dimly lit. Dust filled the air and rows of small boxes lined the walls. A counter sat at the back, behind it was another door, which held more stacks of boxes. It seemed no one was here, but Severus knew better. He was hyper-aware, so he caught the faint movement of dust. He turned to the left and there Olivander stood.

"Severus Snape. Ten and a half inches. Dragon heart-string set in pine wood."

"Very good." Severus inclined his head. "But I am not here to catch up. I need a wand for my son. He will be starting Hogwarts this year and cannot keep using the hand-me down that I provided him with.” Shadow had to have a wand to check at the Ministry tomorrow, and it could not be Harry Potter's wand.

"Son, eh?" Olivander glided forward, his eyes glowing eerily. He put on his most ominous and
knowing face. He loved impressing the children. Most of the year he was alone and lonely. Only the few months before school did he get to play, and he went out of his way to make a lasting impression.

Shadow lifted his head and met the wand-maker's eyes. The effect was instantaneous. Olivander froze, horror slowly seeping from his mind into his limbs, stiffening them. The old man quickly made a gesture with his fingers in the motion of a simple defensive spell, had he been holding his wand. It was purely reaction, no spell was actually cast. Much in the way a Muggle would cross himself, Severus considered.

"A Cursed one!" Olivander hissed, backing away now.

Shadow had gone rigid. Severus could clearly see the aggravation and disappointment in the way he held his shoulders and the stiffness of his face. "I have no evil intent, sir. I just want to get my wand… Please," he added as an after thought.

Olivander wasn't buying Shadow's stated innocence, no matter how true it really was.

Severus knew it was going to be harder for the elderly to look past the ignorant superstitions surrounding those with multi-colored eyes, but the newer generations grew up with bigger things to worry about and many prejudices and superstitions had dwindled. Severus doubted many of the students would react with fear, except perhaps the Purebloods, or even know about the old superstitions surrounding Shadow's eyes.

"Come now, Olivander. Will you see to us or won't you?" Severus drawled, icy warning in his voice.

"Make him shut his eyes," Olivander demanded, hovering between desire for the money a purchase would bring him and ordering them out.

Shadow sighed, looked up at Severus as if for guidance, then shut his eyes. For good measure, he tipped his head forward and his soft, ebony curls hid his face further. Standing like that, he looked thin and small, an innocent fourteen-year-old boy. There was nothing remarkable about him. Severus was pleased his son, at least, had the ability to act and deceive. Unlike Miss Pucey, Shadow was a true Slytherin.

Not at all inclined to draw things out, Olivander looked at Shadow's aura and went to fetch the most likely candidates. The first exploded the box Olivander brought it in. The second spit a single white spark before dying. But the third…

Violet ribbons spilled and cascaded around them and splashed the walls with rich, warm light. Even Olivander was awestruck at the utter beauty of it. He didn't even make a fuss about Shadow's eyes as the teen stood there with them wide open and grinning with delighted shock.

"Good." Severus allowed a small smile of his own. It looked like Shadow's new wand was even better suited for him than the old one. "How much?"

"That is one of the eldest wands in my shop," Olivander said fondly, as if talking about a dear and favored child. "Made almost two hundred and thirty years ago. Ten inches, ash wood with a single, pure gold phoenix feather. It is very sensitive to it's holder's intent and therefore a wand for a wizard skilled at non-verbal casting, but a word of warning, young Snape. Because of it's sensitivity, spells cast with inattention, even if spoken and executed correctly, will have odd effects depending on your mood and unconscious desires."
"Thank you." Shadow nodded and slipped the wand deftly into the sheath on his forearm, hidden by his plain black robes.

"Twelve gallons," Olivander snapped at Severus, having finally realized he had been talking civilly to the teen. "Tis a bit more than I normally charge, but that is a very special wand."

Severus didn't argue. He pulled out his money purse and deposited the right amount into the old man's hand. They ignored the old man glaring at their backs as they swiftly left the store.

"Where are we going?" Shadow asked. He looked up with a frown, noticing they were not heading back toward the entrance.

"To get your school books and equipment," Severus answered. That got his son's attention.

"You know my test results?" Shadow asked, quickening his pace so he could talk more easily.

Severus nodded.

"Well?" Shadow pushed, blue and green eyes bright. In his preoccupation with the news, he had forgotten to hide them.

They passed two second years and Severus' heightened senses picked up their reaction. "Did you see that?" "Yeah, cool." "Wonder what spell he used?" "Maybe we can find out at school." Severus smiled to himself, imagining half the school charming their eyes different colors. It seemed his son would forever be a trend setter, no matter who he was.

"Father," Shadow called impatiently, eyes narrowed.

"You scored all across the board. Third year level in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Fourth year in Astronomy, Divination, Muggle Studies, and History of Magic." Severus saw Shadow frown at this last and explained, "It is only because Binns ruined you the first three years, most everyone else would be at that level as well, no matter what grade they are in."

Shadow nodded, accepting that, but still a bit disappointed in how many classes he scored so low in. He'd been attending Hogwarts for four years, after all, and doing a lot of independent study.

"You scored at a fifth year level in Transfiguration, Herbology, and Care of Magical Creatures. At a sixth year level in Charms, and, should you choose to continue with either Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts, which I highly recommend, you will be taking classes with the seventh years."

Shadow grinned, actually proud of himself. Severus gently squeezed his shoulder, expressing his own pride the only way he knew how. They entered the bookstore and the moment dissipated, but the small smile remained on Shadow's face. It was good to see. His son had been too drawn and pale as of late, too serious.

"So I assume you have an idea of what classes you want to take, regardless of your scores?"

"Yes," Shadow acknowledged and led the way to the appropriate bookshelves. "I'm going to take DADA and Potions, of course. Charms, History of Magic, and Ancient Runes. The twins introduced me to Bill the other night and I was impressed with some of the things he used runes for, as well as the time spell we used. It could come in handy to know. That's five. I can take up to seven, right?"

"That is correct. Although, the recommendation is six," Severus agreed.
"Well, the only classes left that might be useful are Transfiguration, Astronomy, and Herbology. What do you suggest?"

Severus considered. It was hard to do, since he was quiet inside and couldn't really anticipate the best material for future advantage at the moment. "I would recommend Transfiguration and Herbology." They were both included among the fundamentals of Wizarding education. They would surely be the most useful. Possibly.

Shadow nodded, still looking thoughtful. They bought the books needed for those seven classes and a couple more that caught Shadow's eye. An hour and a half after entering the store, they left with a shrunken bag of thirteen books. For the following four hours, they traveled up and down the Alley acquiring the rest of the teen's school supplies.

Arriving back at Grimmauld Place, Severus parted from Shadow, who went upstairs to put his things in his trunk and conspire with the twins most likely. The Potions Master made his rounds of the house, observing the Order members he came across and the Gryffindor students in residence. He wanted as much time as he could observing them since he knew his son was considering making them part of his own inner circle of trusted friends.

He came across many conversations, meaningful glances, whispered conversations, and arguments. In other words, it was a pretty normal night. Except for the undercurrent of tension due to the fact that tomorrow was the day he and his son were going to face the Ministry. It sparked much speculation in some and an interesting silence in others.

Friday early morning

Shadow was sitting at his desk, reading one of his new books. Two hands slid onto his pajama-clad shoulders and a grin split his face. He leaned back, tilting his head to show the vulnerable arch of his throat. His shirt disappeared, the warm hands slid against his skin, making him gasp with pleasure. His head slowly fell forward, exposing his neck. Long fingers patiently rubbed the muscles loose. Shadow moaned softly. It felt divine.

Warm lips caressed his neck, behind his ear. A kiss was laid gently on his now curly hair, and those pale hands slid down his chest, pulling him back against the chair. Lower, lower, and Shadow squirmed, "Please… more…"

"Missed you so much," was moaned into his ear and then he was gasping and arching as that hand firmly fisted his member and squeezed. Pleasure shot down his every nerve, making his legs spread and his arms fall limp. Hot, panting breaths brushed against his ear, and a smooth voice moaned, the vibrations making Shadow cry out softly, thrusting up with his hips until release flung him soaring over a cliff filled with bright fireworks…

Shadow flew out of bed, covered in sweat. Panting, wild-eyed, he stumbled into the farthest corner of the room and stood there, shaken and confused and angry. Twice! That was twice now that he had a… a… nightmare like that! Why was this happening to him? He thought he was more recovered from what Lockhart had done to him than this.

Why was he dreaming of being Kit again? Always in his dreams of the sicko he was screaming somewhere inside, no matter how much his body participated, but these last two… These last two he actually came in the real world and he felt completely like Kit had… Absorbed, excited, content with what was happening while that pervert molested him, touched him, raped him.
Shuddering, horrified, he shakily grabbed his wand and cast the strongest cleaning spell he knew. It hurt, burning his skin slightly and making it red with irritation, but he didn't care. It also made his clothes stiffen and become itchy. It wasn't enough. He banished his bedding to the laundry room, leaving a bare mattress.

He still felt unclean. Lockhart's face and voice and hands, they were burning in his memory, eating him from the inside out until he wanted to crawl away from his skin and escape the filth left behind.

He ran to the bathroom. He knew the water might wake his father, but he couldn't care right now. He had to wash the dream away, wash the memories away. It was over; it happened two years ago. Lockhart was as good as dead! He knew Severus had done something to the man. His father was too vengeful and careful not to have made sure Lockhart could never hurt him again.

"I was ill and that bastard took advantage of that, made me participate against my true will. It isn't my fault Lockhart was a freak. I've let it go; it's all behind me," he told himself while standing under the scalding water.

Shadow remembered vividly Neville facing the monster and ordering him to leave them alone. Lockhart looked so small, confused, and crushable then. And Neville did just that, using his Elemental ability to slam him to the floor. That was the Lockhart he forced himself to remember. The one broken and pathetic. He was nothing to be afraid of. Shadow wasn't going to let a piece of scum like him infect his mind and terrorize him any longer! He was stronger than that!

It was almost an hour before he stepped out of the shower and returned to his bedroom. The striped bed still sat there, but Shadow didn't flinch at the sight. He was steady again. In control. His thoughts were cool and calm. Shutting the door behind him softly, he considered going back to sleep, but it didn't seem worth it. Instead, he grabbed his Ancient Runes text book and sat on the bed, sitting cross-legged with his back to the wall for support.

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Shadow followed Severus out of the phone booth and stepped inside the Ministry for the first time. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but it wasn't what he was seeing. He stood in a very large rectangular hall, twice -maybe three times- larger than Hogwarts' Great Hall. The deep indigo ceiling was inlaid with gleaming golden symbols that were continually moving and changing like some huge stock-market board in New York. The walls on each side were paneled in shiny dark wood and had dozens of gilded fireplaces that would have fit in any royal palace.

Emerald fires burned in each one, and every few seconds a person would step out from the left side and stride on their way. A gathering of witches and wizards, most looking tired, gathered on the right, departing. Shadow knew why they hadn't come by floo. The Ministry could not know the Headmistress was sheltering them at Grimmauld Place. Headmistress McGonagall would be more value to them if she seemed like an impartial voice.

"Shadow."

He looked to see Severus standing several yards ahead, waiting. Shaking himself, he hurried forward and caught up. They moved down the hall, passing the people and fireplaces. Halfway down they came to an ornate fountain. A group of golden figures stood in the middle of small, still pound of crystal clear water. The tallest was a noble-looking wizard at least teen feet tall who stood with his wand pointing straight in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. All looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard.

"Nice," Shadow quipped, his eyes dark with understanding. This was the most prejudiced, sexist
display of craftsmanship he had ever seen and it was at the entrance of England's Ministry of Magic. His apprehension tripled at this indication of the type of people they would be dealing with at the hearing.

Finally, they approached the end of the hall. Shadow sneered, but was careful to keep the expression to himself. Before him was a solid gold gate, ornately carved, as if they were the very gates to heaven itself. Shadow didn't notice the desk they were heading toward until they were almost on top of it. It was small and slightly battered looking. The man sitting behind it looked bored and could have used a shave. A small sign was hung over the side. It read: Security.

Ministry priorities and competence at work, Shadow thought in disgust. Voldemort's success is starting to look less and less like skill.

The guard weighed their wands, which meant he recorded their type and then handed them back. Shadow was stunned, but kept his face carefully blank. He had assumed the wands would be held here for safe keeping. Guess not. His fears crystallized inside him and he felt himself become more aware of everyone around him. They would be armed as he was. It was not safe here by any stretch of the imagination.

Shadow became more and more dumbfounded as they rode the lifts and he heard department names like: the Official Gobstone Club, Ludicrous Patents Office, Pest Advisory Bureau, and the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. At least there were sane offices as well. Things like: the Portkey Office and Apperation Test Center, the Department of International Cooperation, the Department of Magical Law, and the International Confederation of Wizards. So the government wasn't completely loony, but it was a near thing from what Shadow could tell.

The elevators went up. They were already far below ground. The highest floor was level one, and the entrance floor was level eight. They got off at level two and a cool female voice announced, "Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services."

They turned a corner, walked through a pair of heavy oak doors, and found themselves in a room full of cubicals, chatter, laughter, and zooming paper airplane memos. A small, crooked sign on the wall read: Auror Headquarters. Severus approached the nearest cubical. A woman with an eye patch turned around and looked them over with a cool and suspicious eye.

"Yes?"

"We're here for the Snape hearing," Severus answered evenly.

The woman didn't say anything for a second. She took her time looking over them. They were both dressed in formal silk robes. You could just see the Egyptian cotton shirts near their necks, buttoned up with mother-of-pearl buttons. Severus wore a deep green tie, Shadow went without since he was just a fourteen-year-old. Best to play up his youth; they might be easier on Severus that way.

The Potions Master had his hair pulled back in a low, short pony-tail. Worn like that, it looked shiny instead of greasy, but it revealed his hard, chiseled face. His father had been through too much to look young and his features were never considered beautiful. His skin was pale in a sallow way, his nose was large and hooked, and his eyes were deep-set and almost as black as his pupils. But he looked respectable and powerful. That mattered more than beauty in most arenas anyway.

Shadow, like his father, was slender and fine-boned. His hair was black and there was no mistaking the thin, arched eyebrows or the sharp cheekbones and chin, but his features were softer with youth and his nose was smaller, his lips fuller. He wasn't a pretty-boy like Draco, but he wasn't ugly. He
was actually pretty average, if it weren't for his eyes and curls.

"And you are?" the woman asked archly when her examination was done.

"Severus and Shadow Snape," the Potions Master answered.

The woman nodded to herself, her eyes lingering on Shadow, and said, "They're holding your hearing in Courtroom Ten."

Severus tensed, his face blanking completely. Even with his shields up a full strength, Shadow felt a soft jab of shock, fear, and fury from the man, but he didn't question him until they were on the lifts again and riding down to the ninth level, which was ominously the only level under the Entrance Hall. Great, even deeper under ground. Shadow felt his stomach tighten with apprehension.

"Courtroom Ten is usually reserved for the high profile cases and the sentencing of criminals," Severus explained tightly. "I was once tried there for my crimes."

Shadow saw him twitch his arm slightly, the one that still bore the Dark Mark. The teen's insides turned to ice.

"Department of Mysteries," the elevator announced and the doors opened.

The large hall looked identical to the one directly above, but it was empty with no windows and poor lighting. There was a single black door at the end of the hallway, one that reminded him of… But then Severus tugged him through a doorway to his left and down a flight of damp stone stairs. The teasing memory slipped away.

"The lifts don't go down to the courtroom level?" Shadow guessed.

"No, they do not," Severus answered tightly, leading them even further down.

They stepped off the stairs at the bottom and found themselves in a dungeon corridor, complete with torches set in brackets and black soot staining the wall above the yellow flames.

"I think I'm about ready to visit France," Shadow murmured.

"Not yet." Severus shook his head. "Come along."

They stopped at a grimy looking door, a dark brown in color. It had an immense iron lock, but it hung open. Severus turned the heavy door handle and pushed it open revealing a circular dungeon room. The walls were lined with benches that went up several rows. A single chair - the arms covered in heavy, lifeless silver chains - sat in the middle of the floor, center stage to all those seats.

Thankfully, the bottom spectator seats were empty. Only the top rows were full. The lighting was so dim, the figures were shadowy and ominous. Neither Severus nor Shadow stepped further in the room. Carefully, gently, Shadow opened his senses. Severus was shielding, but anticipation and harsh suspicion snapped around the people sitting up high.

After a few seconds, a cold male voice rang out, "You are late."

Still neither Snape moved.

"Take a seat, Severus Snape," a woman spoke. "The boy may sit on a lower bench for now."

Severus moved forward. Shadow watched as he sat gracefully in the horrid chair. The chains twitched and clattered threateningly, but they did not bind him. Shadow remained standing by the
door. No way was he leaving the only exit. This seemed to be permissible because they began questioning his father, not mentioning it.

The Potions Master calmly answered their every question concerning Amalia's rape and Shadow's birth. He explained that it was his fear that the Death Eaters would kill his son, as they had his wife and daughter, that led him to hide Shadow and remove him from the Ministry's awareness. In all, it took about thirty minutes. When Severus was finished, an official came forward and gave him Veritaserum and all the questions were asked again.

Severus's voice went soft and smoky. If Shadow didn't know better, he would say the man was completely under the thrall of the potion. But the story came out the same, more detailed as it should under the serum, but the same as the one they had crafted. Finally, the last question was asked and answered. Shadow expected them to release Severus then, but instead new questions were asked and they had nothing to do with suddenly having a son.

"Describe the events of Saturday, June 24th."

"I was standing on the observation platform with the judges, Ministry officials, and the rest of the Hogwarts teachers. A sharp pain in my mark disrupted my attention and I noticed Karkaroff tensing. Before I could draw attention to him, the man fled. Albus and I went after him. Albus closed the wards, so Karkaroff turned and headed for the school. We continued to follow him and eventually ended up on the Astronomy Tower.

"Magic flared around us as soon as we stepped on the stones. We were temporarily blocked from a good portion of our magic. I'm not familiar with the specific spell or ritual used, but Karkaroff was ready and he launched a vigorous attack. I went down under a curse designed to unravel my leg. Albus lasted longer and looked to be recovering when Karkaroff became desperate and used the Killing Curse. Albus fell from the Tower.

"I managed to convince Karkaroff to spare me, saying I was a spy still in the Dark Lord's employ. He wasn't sure and decided to play it safe and deliver me to the Dark Lord to decide for himself. With the Headmaster's death, the wards had greatly weakened and together Karkaroff and I were able to Apparate to the source of the disturbance in our marks.

"We arrived in a dark graveyard and came upon the scene of a complex, Dark ritual. Diggory was already dead, used in the ritual. A crowd of Death Eaters, who had answered the summons already, stood in a circle. Karkaroff and I pushed through to find the revived Dark Lord battling a battered Potter.

"They cast spells at the exact same time and the two wands connected. I later learned this was because they possess brother wands. There was a huge explosion and, when I could see again, the Dark Lord and Potter were gone. The Death Eaters fled while I lingered, using the excuse of my wounded leg to tally. When I was alone, I went back to Diggory and temporarily reversed the portkey spell on the Triwizard Cup to bring us back to Hogwarts.

"I returned to the Great Hall where I was questioned. I remained with the staff and Ministry officials for two weeks, helping them in the investigation of the events leading up to these tragedies. We discovered the real Professor Moody trussed up in a trunk; the man we had been dealing with all year had been a Dark Lord supporter on polyjuice: Barty Crouch Jr.

"We further speculated that Crouch helped Karkaroff get Potter's name to come out of the Goblet as a fourth champion and arrange the magical trap on the Tower. One or both of them may even be responsible for the Imperius Curse that had been cast on Viktor Krum and Cedric Diggory prior to his death. We also found Barty Crouch Sr's body on the grounds in the form of a transfigured bone.
The missives that went out since the time of his death, which was estimated to have been on May 24th, had all been forged, possibly sabotaging any number of projects in Crouch's department.

"When nothing else could be done or discovered, I took my leave and returned to my son to continue healing. After considering everything that had happened and the return of the Dark Lord, I decided I must keep Shadow close to me. The Dark Lord will know he never assigned me the position of spy and, therefore, realize the depths of my betrayal. He will be more persistent and ruthless in his revenge than ever the Death Eaters were. Shadow will only be safe at Hogwarts, so I have brought him here to renew his identity so that he may be enrolled."

There was a low murmuring around the spectators up in the wings. Shadow wanted to move forward, past the glare of the torch, and look into their faces. He wanted to know who they were up against, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the door. His father sat passive and composed, still seemingly under the potion's effects.

"When Karkaroff murdered Albus Dumbledore, you claimed your allegiance was to the Dark? To save your life?"

"Yes."

The murmurs grew louder and the tone was not at all pleasant. Accusation and disgust beamed down on him causing Shadow to grind his teeth. Severus couldn't expand on that answer since he was pretending to be dosed with Veritaserum! These bastards were herding him into the most implicating answers possible.

"Why would you do that?" he called.

"Albus had fallen. I knew we were in grave trouble. My mark was burning, the Hogwarts champions were strangely delayed, Albus was now dead, and the Death Eaters had been reorganizing and becoming more active since the World Cup. If I could get Karkaroff to reveal the reason behind the sudden return of Death Eater activity, I could warn Minerva McGonagall and the Ministry. It was the only way I saw to be of any use to the Light."

Shadow allowed a faint smile as the murmuring grew less and the emotions in the room slid from hostile to thoughtful, but there were still flares of disbelief and frustration. Severus definitely had enemies here.

"And you are certain it was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in the graveyard?"

"No."

Excited murmurs went up.

"Explain!" a man cried triumphantly.

"The magic felt very much like the Dark Lord and he was able to summon the Death Eaters, but he looked different. That could be due to the ritual used or maybe they just found a way to resurrect the Dark Lord's power and not You-Know-Who himself."

"Do you know the whereabouts of any Death Eaters besides yourself?"

"No."

"Is Harry Potter alive?"
"I don't know."

This time there was a good ten minutes where the people in the stands whispered to each other, the flavor of disappointment sparking around them because Severus couldn't help them. Shadow shifted impatiently, mentally willing them to hurry up.

Finally, a woman spoke. "Severus Snape. You admit to being a willing Death Eater. You admit to raping an innocent witch, Amalia Ashton, among numerous other crimes?"

"Yes," Severus answered calmly.

"You witnessed Albus Dumbledore's death and did nothing to apprehend his murderer?"

"Yes."

"You willingly committed crimes against the Wizarding World. You've admitted to murder, as well as arson, and now rape. You are a danger to the world and should be punished for your crimes."

Shadow felt his heart slam against his ribs, blood drained from his face. No. They couldn't do this.

"He was pardoned since he was serving the Light and served three months in Azkaban for all crimes committed as a Death Eater," a reasonable female voice spoke up. "But I agree. Severus Snape is a dangerous man. Especially since Albus is gone and no longer able to promise this wizard's good behavior. His behavior on the Tower is morally questionable. That has not been pardoned."

Another voice agreed. "We had no need for your continual service as a spy. It would have been better had you brought down the murderer or died for the Light, not again find an excuse to return to the Dark that once ensnared you."

"Imprison him. He is too dangerous," a woman called.

"He'd have to face a trial first," a man tisked. "And we have not the time for that right now."

"Bind him," another suggestion was made.

A round of agreement met this idea. Shadow clenched his hands into fists, desperately trying to keep his mouth shut and keep his composure. Speaking out would do nothing except bring their attention to him, and he had a feeling he did not want their attention.

"Would you, Severus Snape, submit willingly to temporary restrictions placed upon you to prove your good intentions to this august body?" a voice droned.

Severus paused but then answered, "Yes."

Shadow seethed, resenting the power these cretins held over them and what they were doing to his father. What right did they have? It was ridiculous!

"We will place a monitoring device on you. You are not allowed to leave Hogwarts unless it is sanctioned by Headmistress McGonagall and you may not use any Dark magic for any reason, not even self-defense. You will remain in contact with the Ministry, should there be a need for additional questioning. Further restrictions may be invoked should they become necessary."

"For how long?" Shadow asked, unable to stand it any longer.

"For as long as we deem it is needed," he was answered. "Do you give your oath to obey these restrictions, Severus Snape?"
"I do."

An official stepped away from the shadows and administered the Veritaserum antidote. Severus took it and began blinking rapidly. He sat straighter, his face hardening. The official also handed him a metal band. Severus took it with obvious disdain and allowed it to close around his ankle. Shadow closed his eyes, sick with the feeling of relief and accomplishment that chaining his father gave these people.

"You may step back Mr. Snape and your son may take a seat."

Shadow moved forward with great reluctance. Pity and curiosity lapped at his mind. He didn't want anything of theirs touching him, but he wasn't about to shut down his only way to get insight into their plans and attitudes.

Sitting in the chair, he looked up and saw that there were fifty men and woman, all old, looking down on him. They wore plum-colored robes with an elaborate silver W stitched on the left-hand side of the chest. In the very middle and one of the youngest, Shadow recognized Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. Beside him were two women, one was still in shadow. The other was a fat, toad-like woman with large blue eyes and fake curly hair. She was glaring in disgust and hate at both him and Severus.

Speaking of whom, Severus hadn't retreated to the open doorway as Shadow expected. Instead the man stood behind the chair supportively. He stood straight and proud, his hands clasped behind him at his lower back. Shadow was grateful for that and the fact that these people were sitting far enough away that his eyes would seem like the same color. He didn't need that crap on top of all of this other shit.

"How old are you, Mr. Snape?" Fudge asked.

Shadow guessed that they had picked one speaker so as to prevent him from feeling ganged up on. Too late, he thought ruefully. "Fourteen," he answered evenly.

"And how old were you when your mother died?"

"Two and a half."

"How did you come to understand what happened?"

"My father told me," Shadow sneered faintly; who else would have told him? "He explained what happened and that I would need to go into hiding to be safe."

"He told you, at two years old, that your mother and baby sister were murdered and that you were in danger as well." Fudge frowned, but sharp excitement flashed through the Minister's mind.

"Yes." Shadow glared. "I needed to know what happened to my mother. He also promised he would keep me safe. I was not afraid."

"How often do you get to see your father during the year?"

"About one weekend a month during the school year and most of every summer."

"Who looks after you when he's not there?"

"I was watched by skilled tutors and house elves, which is the practice, I believe, in almost all Pureblood homes."
"When you misbehaved, what was your father's response?"

Shadow began to understand what they were looking for and he felt rage stir in his belly. They were looking for evidence of abuse and mistreatment! Severus was the one who saved him from abuse! He was the first adult to ever care for him! How dare they! Shadow couldn't even answer, afraid of what might come out of his mouth. He felt like he was roasting alive with anger.

A cool, strong hand settled on his shoulder and squeezed.

"Mr. Snape?" Fudge asked, not quite able to hide the eagerness in his voice. "Would you like us to have your father step outside while you answer? Professor Snape, if you could be so good as to step away from the chair and your son?"

"No," Shadow answered clearly, ice filling his voice. "I want him here."

"You sound distressed," an elderly wizard pointed out.

"The atmosphere in here is a bit overwhelming," he drawled.

There were shocked murmurs to this answer. Shadow was pleased when he sensed some shame among the other emotions. Good.

Fudge cleared his throat. "We must ask these questions. It is the Ministry's responsibility to make sure every Wizarding child is cared for properly. We have quite a bit to catch up on, eh?"

Shadow closed his eyes, Occluding to keep his emotions under control. The scope of the Ministry's failure to protect him was too much to contemplate.

"Now. We have a source stating that they have observed you for a few days. They say you shy away from physical contact and even flinch if someone touches you unexpectedly."

"I am uncomfortable with strangers. Many people are," Shadow said through tightly gritted teeth. Someone in the Order has been slipping the Ministry information and they would pay.

"You still haven't answered the question, Mr. Snape. How were you punished? Give us an example."

Taking a deep breath, Shadow pushed down all his emotions and Occluded his mind fiercely. His expression calmed and his voice relaxed. "I was mostly punished by my tutors with extra assignments. Because my father was absent a lot, I tended to not act out while he was home. I wanted to impress him."

"Are you saying your father never had cause to be angry with you?" Fudge demanded.

"He's been annoyed, disappointed, and worried, but I only ever remember one time when he got angry."

"And what happened?"

"I was eight or nine," Shadow began, projecting boredom. "I was tired of being in hiding and wanted to play with other children. I escaped the safe house and went into a Muggle village. My tutor had to contact my father and tell him I was missing. Father made an excuse at school and came home immediately to help search for me."

"He found me in the park, upset. The Muggles had seen me coming from the direction of our house
and there were rumors about the people who lived there. They acted like I carried the plague. They were short and abrupt, and the children were worse. They called me names and even threw rocks. Anyway, Father found me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me lightly, saying never to run away like that again. Then he grabbed me into a hug and carried me all the way home."

Shadow looked at the faces peering down at him. The women were giving off soft emotions of sympathy and sweetness. The men were mostly amused. There were still a few who were suspicious and disappointed at the tale; Fudge and the toady-woman were two of these. Shadow decided he would use the bloom of good will toward him to his advantage. It was time to end this farce.

"My father is a good one. He has never hurt me; I've never been afraid of him. We may not have a normal father-son relationship, but that is because our situation is an unusual one. I never had the chance to take my father for granted."

"Very well," a woman spoke. "We will officially register you as a citizen. We will need to take a sample of your blood to verify your identity and record your wand. Also, an official from Wizarding Child Services from Saint Mungo's will visit once a month to check up on your progress in integrating yourself into society."

"Thank you," Severus said in his smooth, dark voice.

Shadow allowed the official to come forward and take the blood sample and he showed them his new wand. That done, he stood and bowed. Severus inclined his head, but before they could move to leave, another man spoke toward the back.

"Headmistress McGonagall has sent us the results of your testing, young Snape. It is very impressive, but perhaps understandable considering your only friends were tutors growing up."

"Thank you," Shadow answered, hiding his impatience to just get out of there.

"You tested above the 5th year level in three subjects, correct?"

"Yes. Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Charms."

"The Headmistress requested that we arrange for you to take the OWL exam for those classes, as you would have done as a 5th year. We agreed. There will be qualified examiners sent to Hogwarts on the third of September."

"Thank you," Shadow said again.

This time they were not stopped as they made their way to the door. Shadow brooded all the way back to the lifts. Sure they had gotten what they wanted. He was legally acknowledged as Shadow Snape and he was allowed to go to Hogwarts, but at what price?

Severus was bound and forced to act as a prisoner with no rights! Shadow was going to have to put up with interviews with a case witch or wizard who would be looking for signs of distress and abuse! It was intolerable! And what if Severus really believed it? That he deserved to be treated in this manner or that any humiliation suffered on his part is acceptable if it were for Shadow.

Shadow was so distracted by his thoughts that he didn't react when the lift door opened revealing Lucius Malfoy waiting for them. The blond man's smirking, gaunt face filled his vision for the split second before there was a violent tug behind his navel and the world melted away from him.

xXxXxXx
The lift doors were only halfway open when the pale hand reached for his son. Time slowed and Severus felt like his world was exploding around him. He wasn't prepared. The chance that the Death Eaters would come to the Ministry never occurred to him. They were in hiding, on the defensive. This couldn't be happening!

Grabbing Shadow, intending to pull him back out of range, and reaching for his wand at the same time, Severus just wasn't fast enough. Lucius activated the portkey he held and the three of them disappeared.

Like a whirlwind, they arrived in a small room. Severus continued to pull his wand, but before he could level it on Lucius, he was pulled off balance by Shadow jerking away with a terrified whine. Instantly, he knew what had happened. Lucius and the portkey, paired with Shadow's emotional turmoil from the trial, had been enough to shatter the mental defenses his son had in place and Boy had risen to the surface.

If Lucius guessed - if he even suspected - that Shadow was really Harry Potter. His son was dead. There would be no delays, no dramatic speeches, no games. Lucius would kill him. Because he had never been as afraid of anything as he was of Demon. Boy's distinct mannerisms were unforgettable. Lucius would know who Shadow was within seconds.

So as he fell, he maintained eye-contact with Lucius, but tilted his wand at his son and cried, "Stupefy!"

The teen's rising voice cut off instantly and his slender body went completely limp. Severus cursed, as if it had all been an accident, and leapt to his feet, while silently thanking every deity he could name for not missing. But spending his spell on rendering Shadow unconscious gave Lucius the chance to cast the disarming spell.

He felt cold as he watched his own wand and Shadow's go flying into their capture's hand. Worse, two laughing figures stepped forward from the shadowed corners. One summoned all magical items on their persons (all of Shadow's jewelry was torn from him, while Severus lost his potions; the Ministry monitoring device was specifically spelled against all tampering and remained in place), and the other cast a spell that bound them in ropes.

Severus fell to his knees, his hair falling half free of its tie and falling messily into his face. Glaring fiercely, he took in his enemies. Avery stood with wild blue eyes, reminding Severus of Sirius in his worst moments. His sandy hair was unbrushed and his robes torn and stained with dirt and possibly blood. Nott Sr looked just as unkept and slightly crazed, though he was quieter about it. Lucius was immaculate as always, but his mouth was too prone to smiling, his cheeks tight with a manic grin. These men were not in full control of their faculties and that made the situation a thousand times more dangerous.

"My, my, Severus," Lucius drawled. "Getting a bit rusty in your old age, aren't we?"

"Obviously," he snapped, his black eyes watching their every move.

Lucius laughed. "Come now, old friend. No need to be so short. I thought you would be delighted to finally hear from us. I apologize for delaying this long, but we weren't sure of your allegiance, you see."

"No?" Severus lifted an eyebrow.

"We've heard so many conflicting stories." Lucius pocketed Severus and Shadow's wands, keeping his own aimed and ready. "You wouldn't be playing both sides, would you, old friend?"
"Of course not, you fool," Severus snarled. "I merely do what I must to subdue the Light."

"You betrayed us to the Ministry fourteen years ago! Just to escape Azkaban!" Avery yelled furiously. "Then you cowered and hid behind Dumbledore for years!"

"That is true," Lucius agreed amiably. He grabbed Avery's arm, restraining him. "You didn't lift a finger to help keep the Chamber open or help make the Sorcerer's Stone vulnerable."

Severus merely stared at them.

"But you were being watched closely. Perhaps you did what you could." Lucius slid his gaze to the unconscious teen at Severus's back. "You did have a child to protect. A son. I know what that's like. Perhaps when Severus was certain he could get away with it and not blow his cover, he would move in the Dark's favor. Striking like a snake when the Light least expected it. Is that what happened, old friend?"

"Yes, Lucius. You know all this," Severus was careful to speak evenly, careful not to provoke any of them.

"We know Karkaroff didn't kill Dumbledore," Nott sneered. "That story you spun after the Resurrection was bogus. That crap in the courtroom was, too. I don't know how, but Veritaserum doesn't work on you."

"That does make it difficult to believe a word that comes out of your mouth," Lucius agreed and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "But someone killed that meddlesome, senile, old man. Perhaps your wand can tell us if it was you? Of course, it will take time to examine."

"But he took that boy's body and warned the Ministry the Dark Lord was back!" Avery snarled.

"Perhaps he was returning to his post." Lucius shrugged. "And it is to our favor that the Ministry and the Wizarding World run around frantic with fear. It would have been much worse if our dear Severus had told them that our Lord was weakened and nearly defeated."

"However, he didn't try to contact us at all since then," Nott pointed out, frowning.

"Perhaps he did try. We are well hidden." Lucius grinned. "The wand should tell us. We should find a Killing Curse somewhere in it's recent history. If not, then…" He shrugged, but his meaning was clear. Severus and Shadow would be killed.

"And if I erased the evidence?" Severus sneered. "Suspicion is against me already. If I prepared for the eventuality of someone doing a history on my wand?"

"Let's hope you weren't so thorough this time, dear friend," Lucius said lowly. With that, he turned and stalked from the room. Avery and Nott followed and slammed the door behind them.

Relaxing a bit, Severus looked around. The room was small. Maroon carpet, white walls, a wooden door. There were no windows or furniture. A chamber pot sat in the corner and that was it. They were still tied. Severus considered his options, but there was very little he could do on his own. As much as he wished he could let Shadow sleep through this mess, he'd need his help.

Closing his eyes, Severus reached deep inside and began to push his magic out. Worried there were monitoring devices on the room, he didn't want to give away the fact he could do minor wandless magic, so he'd have to make it non-verbal as well. Sweat broke out on his skin, but he continued to visualize what he wanted his magic to do.
Minutes went by, feeling like hours, when Shadow finally groaned.

"You with me?" Severus asked softly. He watched his son carefully, half terrified it would still be Boy.

The teen was lying on his side, his hands tied at the small of his back and attached to the bindings around his ankles, which had pulled his feet up close to his bottom. It looked very uncomfortable. Would the restraints and the position be enough to keep Boy on the surface? Merlin, he hoped not. But then Shadow's head tilted and a very aware, sane blue eye gazed up at him.

Severus almost collapsed with relief and his heart rate finally started to slow. "Very good," he sighed.

"What happened?" Shadow asked very softly, his eyes taking in every detail of the room.

"My loyalty is being questioned by my old comrades. They've gone to check my wand for the curse that felled the old man."

Shadow stared into his father's eyes and connected to his mind. **And what will they find?**

I have not removed the curse from my wand's memory. Instead I placed it under a Dark Arts spell to conceal all Dark spells it casts. The Light would never notice it, and the Dark will know how to break it and recover the proof they will need to satisfy themselves I am still their ally.

Smart, Shadow acknowledged and was once again reminded that this man always beat him at chess.

Still, it will take them half a day to break the spell and learn my wand's history. And even then they may require more proof. I must admit I am not pleased with you being in their company for so long.

What can we do about it? Sending me away isn't going to instill faith in your allegiance to the Dark.

So far I've seen Nott Sr, Avery, and Malfoy, he said grimly. **Who knows how many more of my old comrades are here. I don't care if it causes doubt. I'll deal with it, but I want you gone.**

You want me to bust out of here? It kinda tips our hand, Shadow sneered.

Severus almost snarled out loud, but he was saved from a response by the door opening. Two pairs of watchful eyes snapped forward as Lucius walked in.

"Severus, you little snake." He grinned and shook his finger at the man kneeling before him. "There is a clever lock on that wand of yours and it would be much quicker if you would be so good as to hand over the key."

"Lucius, you know full well what you will find in that wand," Severus said lowly. "I am Dark."

"Yes, but you haven't shown much loyalty to your fellows," the blond tisked, crossing his arms.

"That is because I serve the Dark Lord not them. They deserve no loyalty of mine," Severus snarled. "They've attacked me, jealous of my position, and murdered my wife and daughter. I will not play nice. In fact, I insist you let Shadow leave. He is mine and I won't have him here to be toyed with."
"I understand completely, Severus," Lucius said earnestly and crouched down so that he could look in the Potions Master's dark eyes. "I know how grasping they can be. I safeguarded my own son, after all. I will let yours escape once you come and unlock your wand."

Severus said nothing for a long moment. Go with Lucius and win Shadow free, but at the price of leaving him unprotected for an unknown amount of time, or refuse and appear even more suspicious and paranoid? Going with Lucius would also free him of his bindings and let him scout the territory. Ultimately, he had to trust that Shadow could fend for himself for a short time.

"Very well. Unbind me."

Lucius grinned. He stood and flicked his wand, dissolving Severus's ropes.

"And my son," Severus said firmly, staring straight at Lucius.

"He must stay here. We can't have an impressionable boy striding around," Lucius warned.

"I know," Severus said impatiently. "But I'm not leaving him trussed up like some wild animal. Unbind him. Now."

Lucius nodded as if he had expected such a response and the ropes disappeared from around Shadow's frame. The teen cried out, pain flashing through his numb limbs. Severus tensed and glared fiercely at Lucius, who merely shrugged with that maddening grin.

"Shall we?" the blond asked sweetly.

Without a word, Severus strode to the door and Lucius followed him out.

Shadow muttered angrily, rubbing at his shoulders. He was alone, but he was far from helpless. Quietly, he began planning and plotting scenarios for escape, rescue, and defense. He had a vast number of vicious spells on his side and the ability to cast wandlessly, not to mention some skill in hand-to-hand combat and his deadly Animagus form if push came to shove.

Getting up, he began doing stretches to get his blood flowing and loosen his muscles, all under the guise of seemingly innocent restless pacing. He could almost smile. The Death Eaters were dangerous, yes, but they had no idea who they were dealing with. In that way, they could almost be pitied.

Almost.

Chapter end.
Darkness and Revelations

Shadow didn't know how long he had been waiting. Hours certainly. It had been long enough that his mouth was very dry, his saliva thickening. It was time he tried breaking out. He wandered over to the door and ran his eyes over it. It looked normal, but he could sense magical power around it. He tried the knob. It was locked. Backing up a bit, he lifted his hand and glared at the door, willing it to open.

His magic punched out viciously and…

SNAP

He froze, breath caught in his throat, his eyes wide. The room had been plunged into pitch-darkness. Heart thudding in his chest, Shadow reached for the door and tried to open it. Nothing. It was still locked. The door wasn't even dented. Shadow's eyes opened wide. Fear washing over him like rain. He was in serious trouble.

xXxXxXx

Lucius stood in the open doorway to an empty side chamber. He was watching Severus unlock his wand. Four Death Eaters in black robes and white masks were standing in each corner, wands held ready in case the slippery Potions Master tried anything. He was very pleased with how perfectly everything was going.

Someone cleared their throat behind him.

"Yes?" he asked, turning to see McNair shifting nervously behind him.

"There was a magical surge in the room with the kid. Pretty powerful, but the containment spells haven't been disturbed. We've cut off all the lights, as you ordered to be done should this happen."

"Good." Lucius nodded and smiled wickedly. "The kid probably used a Rune circle or something on the door, trying to escape. He doesn't have his wand so making him blind should put a stop to that. Let me know if anything like this happens again."

"Yes, sir," McNair answered sharply and turned to resume his post.

Yes. Things were going perfectly indeed. Lucius sighed contentedly and returned his attention back to Severus. His son was resourceful, Lucius would give him that, but he wasn't going to be able to escape. In fact, neither of the Snapes were ever going to leave alive.

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Shadow tensed, ears straining. Had someone come in? Had he heard something? Heart rocketing in his chest, he didn't dare to breathe. He'd been trapped, blind, for hours it seemed. Was someone finally using the darkness as cover for an attack? Crouching, he forced his eyes closed and silently brought in air through his mouth.

The room was completely quiet. No one had entered. Another false alarm. Slowly, he calmed. Forcing his hands to stop shaking and his heart to still it's rapid pace.
"I'm not afraid of the dark," he told himself. "Or of being locked in dark places."

If they thought this was going to rattle him, they were very wrong. Shadow spent his childhood learning to cope with the cupboard. It had been his room and refuge from the Dursleys, but even so panic and a clawing sense of need to get outside had sometimes come over him. So he had mastered several techniques to push that feeling away.

He was using all of them now. He needed them. Because this wasn't his cupboard. He wasn't safe from attack here, protected because no one else could fit into his room. No. His enemies could slip in easily and silently if they wished. He had to stay alert. Every moment. So he continued his pacing, carefully memorizing the room in numbers: seven strides, ten strides, twelve diagonally. If they did launch an attack, he would know the room and they would not. That would give him a distinct advantage.

A while later, when he knew it by heart, he sat in the middle, cross-legged. His feet were tired of walking, so he began to think. He thought about his father. Severus would have been back by now if he were all right. How long had they been missing? Was anyone looking for them? If they were, where would they look first?

That was easy. They would look at the Ministry. How long would it take to search the whole building? Too long, Shadow thought grimly. But the Ministry had put a monitoring device on Severus. Could the Order track them with that? Probably. Unless… Unless the Ministry kept that quiet and prevented searches. Shadow wouldn't be surprised for a second if Fudge was working with Malfoy. That pompous ass was power and money hungry enough to sell his soul to the devil.

xXxXxXx

The potion threatened to boil over and billowing acid green smoke rose like volcanic ash, filling the air. Severus was wearing protective gloves and facial mask and he could still feel the sting. A quick counter-clockwise turn, followed by a pinch of rose to calm the unstable brew… The potion turned a darker green and began to settle down.

Thank Merlin, Severus thought. He stood back with a sigh of exhaustion and sat on his stool, massaging his brow. This was one of the more complex potions he had ever brewed. After unlocking his wand, they had taken him to a lab and given him a potion recipe. It was of a potion he had never encountered before and it was extremely complex. The lab showed evidence of there being several failed attempts before he had arrived.

Severus wasn't a stupid man. He knew the intentions Lucius had for him, but the man was unraveling at the edges. There was a way to manipulate that into his favor. He had experience in calming madmen, after all. He served both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. So he set out to make himself invaluable. He would brew the potion correctly, and he then he would have leverage to convince Lucius to let his son go.

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Shadow had long ago run out of strategic thoughts and had turned to a different kind of thinking all together. Once he was out of here, the first thing he was going to do was drink a gallon of water. Then he was going to eat four of Mrs. Weasley's meat pies. With strawberries and cream for dessert, maybe. Yeah. Then he was going to have some of her potatoes and gravy. Mmmm… Some pumpkin juice and chocolate pastries. He'd never undervalue her again.

xXxXxXx
Lucius sat in a small rocking rowboat. He hated the damn thing. Every wave threatened to be the one to tip him into the frigid sea. A soft whirl and he was no longer alone. His son sat across from him, straight and tall. His short blond hair was slicked back and his eyes were sneering as soon as he took in what exactly they were sitting in.

Lucius laughed. "Welcome, son."

Draco inclined his head, the perfect pureblooded son. "Hello, Father."

The man gently grabbed his heir by the shoulder and Apparated them the final distance to his headquarters.

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Shadow had begun pacing again. He was really thirsty now. It had to have been a day, at least, (it felt like a week, a month, but Shadow knew time seemed longer than it really was) of being trapped in here. He was starting to get weak without water, sleep, and food - in that order. And the smell of his prison was becoming unbearable. It wasn't like there was a toilet. The corner had to do.

He wasn't about to wait until he couldn't fight or escape if he had to. He was going to have to try and break through the wards on the door again.

Then again, he should conserve his strength in case the Death Eaters gave him an opening. If he spent himself against that unbreakable barrier when he already tried his best with that first strike, then he'd have nothing with which to attack the next Death Eater who stuck his ugly head through the door.

But if he waited too long, he wouldn't be able to attack anyway. He would have passively let his enemies kill him without a decent fight.

And that was intolerable. He would go down fighting if he had to go down at all…

Worn, hungry, stir-crazy, and unsure, Shadow continued pacing. He'd wait a little longer. It couldn't be much longer before someone made a move. Severus would come soon. Someone would remember he was trapped in this closet!

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It was done. Severus staggered back and collapsed against the wall, sliding down to sit bonelessly on the stool he had pushed aside ten hours ago.

"Very good." Lucius grinned down at him. "You have a remarkable skill, Severus."

"Thank you." He smiled back, hate hidden in his dark eyes. "May I ask who invented such a work of art and what purpose it is used for?"

"No," the blond madman answered with a laugh. "I think I'll let it be a surprise. Yes. Everyone will be very surprised."

Lucius caressed the cauldron before gesturing sharply at the two Death Eaters waiting obediently near the door. Severus watched as they deftly placed preserving spells on the potion and carried the whole cauldron out of the room.

Lucius moved to follow, but stopped, remembering the Potions Master. "You should rest, old friend. Eat, get some sleep. You've had little of both since you began," he said gently.
Severus nodded and pulled himself to his feet. "May I see my son?"

"No," Lucius shook his head and then grinned. "Because he is no longer here. I let him go. I left him on the shore ten miles from here. He can find the rest of the way home, I assume?"

Severus stabbed out in a careful whip of Legemency. Lucius wasn't lying. Closing his eyes in relief, he managed a smile in return. His son was safe.

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Shadow about jumped out of his skin when he heard the loud (to him) scrape of the door being pushed open. The half-open door let in dim orange light. It was like looking into the sun after so many long hours in the dark. A sharp outline of a figure blocked most of it, thankfully.

Wait…

An outline wasn’t good, it meant someone was here. A Death Eater was here to kill him! Heart racing, Shadow crouched, his magic tightly wound and poised inside him. He was weak and dizzy, lightheaded, but he was on his feet and he was still able to move quickly if he had to.

"Shadow?"

The whisper was so quiet, he almost thought he hadn't heard it. Soft steps came forward. Three.

"Shadow? You there? … Gah! It stinks in here."

This was said a bit louder. He definitely heard it that time. Why would the bad guys be calling so softly? He shrugged and decided to answer. "Yeah," he tried to say, but all that came out was a dry croak.

"Thank Merlin," the hushed voice breathed. Then the person was moving forward more quickly, although still slower than a walk. They were uncomfortable in the dark.

Shadow smiled at that, feeling smug. He crouched and prepared to spring. His attacker wouldn't know what hit him.

"I've been looking everywhere for you. When you missed dinner after your hearing, McGonagall knew something was wrong. She deployed everyone to find you two. Of course Lupin came back to the house to tell me. He knew it had to have been the Death Eaters, and who better to infiltrate?"

"Draco?" Shadow grated, shocked that it took him this long to recognize his friend's voice. Joy and relief burst inside his chest like a tangible force and he almost couldn't contain the sudden shaking in his hands.

"Yes." The blond finally found Shadow's arm and began tugging it back to the door. "I wrote my father, saying Blaise was acting suspiciously and I needed to come home. That I had information I couldn't write down. He didn't write back until the next afternoon, but he gave me instructions. They were very round about. Almost like a treasure hunt. Took me until this morning to get here. This place is a maze. I couldn't go looking for you until my father was done breathing down my neck."

They were out in the hallway now. It was stone, like a cave, which was completely unexpected since the room he had been held in was normal with square walls. The blond was tense and his grey eyes were bright and sharp, alert. Shadow swayed. Draco supported him with an arm around his waist and looked carefully at his friend's face, worry shimmering in his eyes.
"You okay? Did they hurt you? That room was awful."

"Thirsty," Shadow moaned, squinting against the dim lights.

Fury tightened Draco's mouth and he gently led his friend forward. The cave was damp and cool. They passed several crossways, their footsteps echoing softly. They went to the right on the second divergence and left on the fourth. They met no one, heard no one, and despite himself, Shadow began to feel a bit frightened.

Draco stopped at an unassuming door and pushed it open. It was a bathroom. Shadow fell on the sink, slurping up the deliciously cold water. Draco waited, keeping an eye on the hallway. Several minutes later, Shadow finally pulled himself away. His belly was painfully full, swishing when he moved.

"Where is everyone?" he whispered.

Draco looked over his shoulder at him. "The ritual room. They're doing something big in there. I haven't found out what yet. You ready?"

"Yes. What time is it? Have you seen my father?"

"No and ten o'clock Sunday night," the blond answered. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you faster."

"You shouldn't have come at all. I was going to break out soon."

Draco shook his head with a doubtful smirk. Before Shadow could retaliate, the blond pulled him into the corridor again. The two teens made their way through the dimly lit passages. More aware, Shadow was amazed at the complexity of the caverns. It took a good fifteen minutes before they reached a cave opening.

Shadow stared. They were about two hundred feet above the ground and looking over violent seas. The night was dark; the stars and moon shining fitfully through breaks in the thin clouds. The air was cold and the smell of the ocean was overpowering. It smelled like heaven after that room, and he took a deep breath of freedom. He was embarrassed to feel tears rise in his eyes and he grabbed Draco's arm to keep from sinking to his knees.

"I don't know where we are," Draco said soothingly, supporting his friend. He had to speak loudly to be heard over the roar of the waves crashing against the cliffside. "I was portkeyed into a boat a mile off shore and my father Apparated me inside. The caverns are soaked in heavy-duty anti-Apparation and anti-portkey wards, but my father had them lowered briefly to let me in."

"So how do we get out?" Shadow questioned, his eyes scanning the mouth of the cave and the horizon for clues.

"You can Apparate, right?"

"Yes, but you said…"

"The wards end about five feet out," Draco said carefully.

Shadow snapped his head around, eyes wide. "You want me to… jump?"

Draco nodded. "And then Apparate."

"To where?" Shadow asked incredulous.
The blond was about to answer when they heard the sound of quick footsteps coming toward them. They had a few seconds at best and there was nowhere to go. Draco thought his heart was going to explode with terror. Frantic, he looked desperately to his friend for ideas to save themselves, but… Shadow wasn't there!

Gasping, he looked around rapidly. There! A dark, hunched form was hiding next to a bolder. In the dark, the lynx could be just another fallen rock. Draco had no time to feel relief for his father had stepped into the passage.

"Draco?" Lucius asked darkly. His hair was tied back, but his ponytail was whipping around his neck and cheeks. He strode forward, fury in his eyes. "Why are you out of your rooms?"

"I heard a noise. I thought we were in trouble and went to warn you, but I got lost," Draco lied quickly.

Lucius snapped his fist out, backhanding his son hard across the cheek. Draco slammed into the wall with a soft cry. Shadow's tail lashed furiously, but he forced himself to hold still and silent. Moving wouldn't help either of them right now. But God. It was so hard not to leap out and scratch that bastard's face off. Rage was beating warmly in his chest like a second heart.

Draco slowly straightened himself, ignoring the blood trickling down his chin. He lowered his head submissively and said nothing.

"To bed, son. Come," Lucius called calmly, almost affectionately.

Shadow shivered in the dark, sickened.

"Yes, Father," Draco answered evenly. His hand behind his back gestured twice toward the opening, clearly signaling Shadow to escape.

The two Malfoys disappeared. Shadow waited until even his lynx hearing couldn't catch their footsteps before he transformed back into this human form. Helpless rage and fear churned through his chest and head. He couldn't abandon Draco. Especially since they would blame him for the escape, but if he stayed, what could he possibly do? He had no idea about the layout or how many Death Eaters were here. If he went after Draco, he'd most likely be caught and thrown back into that small dark room to die slowly of thirst. That terrified him. He didn't want to die pointlessly. He couldn't face that room so soon.

Punching the rocky floor, he hissed, "Damn it. Damn everything!" Then he flung himself to his feet and jumped from the mouth of the cave... Knowingly abandoning his father and best friend.

The cold wind whipped around him and tore a scream from his throat. The ocean seemed to swell and open up, like a gaping hungry mouth, ready to swallow him into a painful, suffocating death. Shadow screamed denial, almost overwhelmed with a very primitive terror, and closed his eyes, lashing out with every ounce of magic and will he had.

Somewhere safe, he demanded silently. Send me somewhere safe.

With a sharp crack, he disappeared… four feet from the icy water's surface.

xXxxXXX

Neville jerked awake with a startled scream as something heavy fell on top of him, a sharp crack almost deafening him. He flung his hand out and touched his lamp, making light flare inside his room. Eyes as round as saucers, he stared down at his brother, who lay panting, his strange eyes half-
"Shadow!" he cried. "What happened? Are you hurt? Where?" He scrambled from the bed and carefully searched his friend for any wounds.

Shadow managed a weak smile. "Fine. Jus' tired," he slurred. The Apparation had taken almost all he had to give.

Neville didn't have time to feel reassured as he watched his brother's eyes roll, revealing only white, as he began to convulse. Frantic, Neville pinned the thrashing body to the bed. He didn't have the potion that would help. It had expired and he had thrown it away. Tears burned down his cheeks. What if Demon came Out? Would it kill him and Gran and Uncle Algie? Sobbing, he held fast.

Slowly, Shadow's seizure stopped. He lay limp for only a second before his eyes came open. Neville watched as his brother's face slowly twisted into a mask of terror. The curly-haired teen screamed and jerked away, slamming his back into the wall. Neville jumped back, heart racing in his chest, and watched as Boy huddled in the corner, arms protectively flung over his head, keening in terror. The acid stench of urine filled the room.

"What is going on in here?" Augusta demanded, stomping into the room with her bed robe wrapped tightly around her.

Neville jerked in surprise. Boy began to wail, flailing and scratching at the walls, as if trying to go through them to get away. Augusta gasped. She covered her mouth with her hand, watching in horror. Neville leapt forward and herded the silver-haired matron out of his bedroom.

"That's my friend from school, Gran. He… He has a c-c-condition and whenever he gets like this he flees to safe places. All we can do is let him be until he comes out of it," Neville explained, trying desperately to stop the shaking in his voice and limbs.

"He needs a mediwitch!" she protested.

"He has a one," Neville assured, guiding her downstairs and toward the kitchen. Tea would help calm her nerves. "I promise. As soon as he can't hear or see us, he'll calm down. He'll be okay." At least, he hoped so. He had no idea what was going on, what had happened. He was all twisted up inside with worry, but having to calm his grandmother gave him something to focus on.

The two of them sat in the living room with steaming cups of tea and listened to Boy sob and cry broken-heartedly. It was awful. Augusta couldn't take her eyes away from the stairs as she scowled and fiddled with her robe. Neville sat, pale and sweaty. He wanted to contact Remus and Sirius. Where was Severus? But he didn't know if that was the best thing. What if they had been captured and writing would only reveal where his brother had escaped to? He'd have to wait for Shadow to come around and tell him what to do.

It was during breakfast that the anguished crying finally fell silent. Neville shared a look with his grandmother before bolting from the room and running upstairs. Shadow lay, curled on his side. Neville gently brushed his sweaty curls from his face and the blue and green eyes fluttered open briefly. He looked beyond exhausted, but he was sane. Shadow was back. Neville smiled, his hands shaking with relief. Shadow smiled back before his eyes fell closed again.

"Is it over?" Augusta asked stiffly. She came into the room and looked down at the small teen.

"Yes," Neville smiled. "I think he's just sleeping. He looks really tired."

Augusta lifted her wand and cast a few general diagnostic spells. She frowned at the results. "This
boy hasn't eaten for almost sixty hours and he's dehydrated."
"We can't take him to St. Mungo's. I need you to trust me," Neville said firmly, looking up at her.
"I'm not getting into anything foolish and neither will you," Augusta growled. "Is he in trouble with the law? With his parents?"
"It's not like that at all! Death Eaters are after him. He can't go to a public place without his family to protect him, and the fact that they aren't here already worries me. What if they were attacked? Can't we just have Mediwizard Juniper come?"

Augusta had gone rigid at the mention of Death Eaters, but after a long moment she nodded and swept from the room to make the firecall. Neville slumped in relief and looked down at his brother. He was still completely out of it. Sixty hours… That was two and a half days of no food and very little water. What could have happened? Sighing, he carefully tucked Shadow into the bed and pulled over a chair so he could sit with him.

The old, retired mediwizard got there within the hour. He ran several tests, muttering the whole while. The man was going on one-hundred-and-five years old, but the neighborhood still called him for minor things. He said he didn't mind. He liked to keep his hand in. Well, his hand was definitely in it now. Shadow was the worst case he had seen for years.

He gave the teen four potions and some color seeped back into Shadow's pale, drawn face. Neville smiled at the old man, but Juniper did not return the gesture. He was not happy at all.

"He needs sleep," the old man grated. "He's malnourished, dehydrated, and physically and magically exhausted. Not to mention the history of malnutrition here and extensive old wounds. Is this child abused? Are you hiding him from his family?"

Augusta looked at Neville sharply, thinking he had lied to her.

"No, sir!" Neville quickly shook his head. "Shadow's father would never hurt him, but he's been hurt before. His family is a target of the Death Eaters and they got to him once. I'm afraid it has happened again."

"I see," Juniper sighed sadly. "What a thing to do. To a child, no less. Take care of him Augusta. He should wake up tomorrow morning starving."

"I will, Juniper. Thank you."

"Bah," he scoffed, but he smiled at her.

xXxXxXx

Things were no longer perfect, Lucius thought. He stood in his shirt and pants, his sleeves rolled up past the elbow. He was covered in disgusting sweat and flecks of salty blood were splattered across his chest and face. Draco was magically bound on the cold cave floor. His shirt was in shreds and soaked with blood.

CRACK

Draco screamed weakly, which then descended into tortured sobs.

Lucius had been doing this for a while, he didn't know how long. He had been angry, so angry. He was so certain he had released Severus's brat, but McNair assured him he hadn't. The brat had been
in the room the whole time. At least until the wretched boy had escaped. And Draco had helped him!

He frowned. Why was he certain Draco had helped? And what did it matter the brat got away? He was going to release him anyway. Hadn't he just admitted that to himself? Severus was loyal and his work was priceless for their cause. They didn't need the kid to control him. Keeping the brat might provoke anger from the Potions Master. They didn't want that. He was too valuable right now. So maybe this was enough punishment. Besides, he was tired of hearing Draco sob and scream.

Satisfied with his reasoning, Lucius flung the whip away and one of the Death Eaters scrambled to collect it. Lucius looked around at them. Six in all, watching Draco's punishment. As a warning against disobedience, probably. He had forgotten they were there, so caught up was he in the sight and pleasure of seeing Draco's skin part to free the ruby liquid trapped inside.

"Get up, boy. You're a Malfoy," he scolded. Had the boy no sense lying there on the ground?

"Sir?" a Death Eater questioned.

"He had nothing to do with the escape. I see that now. He's too pathetic to stage anything like that." He gazed down at his son. The boy was still whimpering and gasping, moaning in pain. He hadn't moved even though his bindings had been released. He frowned in disapproval. It was only a few lashes. Muggles usually held up better than this. "I remember he woke hearing something the other night. He must have heard Snape's tricky little bastard getting away. He came to get me, but he got lost. Draco is inept, but he is not a traitor."

"Yes, sir!"

They accepted this easily. As they should. Lucius was the master here. He smiled at them. "Have Draco cleaned up and his wounds cared for... How many lashes was that?" He asked out of curiosity. He just couldn't remember.

"Thirteen, sir."

"Very good. Hmmm... He's on the smaller size, still growing," Lucius said thoughtfully. "That might be enough to kill him."

"Yes, sir. He's senseless."

"Well, get Severus then. He's a Potions Master." The blond smiled, satisfied with his plan, and walked away.

xXxXxXx

Shadow woke to the sound of his stomach growling. Gentle morning sunlight was shining on his face and he raised his hand to block his eyes. The room he was in was completely unfamiliar, but he felt safe. Confused, he searched his memory. The last thing he could pull up was almost hitting the water. He shivered. It had been very, very close.

Standing, he saw he was still in the dress robes and clothes he had put on for the Ministry trial. They were battered, but not too bad. What really bothered him was the musky smell clinging to them. Making a face, he headed to the closet. He grinned. Neville! Stripping, he cast a wandless freshening charm on his skin, then pulled on some pants and a t-shirt of his brother's. They were too big, but baggy felt comforting right now and they smelled like Neville. He was truly safe.

He turned and made his way downstairs, toward the soft murmur of voices. He found his brother sitting at the kitchen table. A bald, old man who sat with him, grinning, revealing very few teeth. A
heavy woman with a straight back and a silver bun stood at the stove and looked at him through frowning eyes.

"Shadow! You're up!" Neville cried happily. He jumped to his feet and embraced his friend.

Shadow pat his back and pulled away, uncomfortable with the two strangers watching this. One, he knew, was Neville's grandmother and he had a large well of anger and dislike stored up for her and her treatment of Neville. He didn't want to be at any disadvantage when he was in front of her.

"What happened, then?" Augusta demanded, flicking her wand at a sizzling pan. "Where is your family?"

"Still in danger," Shadow answered and cold dread sliced through his stomach. He bowed. "Thank you for your hospitality. I am very grateful, Ms. Longbottom, but I'm afraid I must leave."

"What kind of gratitude is this?" she asked crossly. "And you haven't even introduced yourself properly."

"I'm Shadow Snape, ma'am, and I really need to go report." He turned and made his way to the living room where he remembered seeing a fireplace. "May I use your floo?"

"Report? What's this?" Augusta rumbled. "Report to whom? Not the Ministry, I take it?"

"May I use your floo?" Shadow asked again, ignoring the question.

"You're going to the Order," the old woman guessed. She stood tall, her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed into slits.

Neville stood to the side, not sure what to do to end this confrontation. He could tell it was important for Shadow to leave, but his grandmother never let go until she was good and ready. He bit his lip and shifted from foot to foot.

"The mediwizard informed me you would be hungry," she said and gestured toward the kitchen. "You won't do anyone any good fainting. Eat and then you may go, young man. And the longer you argue, the longer it will be before you return to the Order, so I suggest you hurry into that kitchen."

Shadow glared hotly, but he couldn't deny how weak he felt. His hands were trembling and he already felt a bit out of breath. Giving in, he returned to the kitchen.

"Sit here," Neville offered and pushed him toward the chair next to his.

"Thank you," Shadow said smoothly, taking the seat. "Mediwizard?"

"He's retired and lives in the neighborhood," Neville explained.

"So what happened, ey, boy?" the old man cut in, practically yelling. "Captured by them Death Munchers, ey?"

Shadow looked at Neville, shocked. His brother flushed, but he shook his head slightly to reassure Shadow they didn't know everything.

"Neville tells us the truth. He doesn't lie to us," Augusta said firmly, misinterpreting the look. She flicked her wand and two plates came soaring over and landed heavily in front of the two teens. A third landed more gently in front of the old man.

"I wasn't aware he knew the truth, is all, Madam Longbottom," Shadow responded and, to forestall
more questions or conversation, he dug into the food. It tasted heavenly.

The Longbottoms let him eat without conversation. Shadow had three helpings and drank four glasses of water. Neville was smiling wryly at this. Even Augusta softened. It's hard to be harsh with a child in obvious need, but eventually Shadow couldn't eat another bite.

"Very well." Augusta gestured for the boys to follow her into the living room. "You may now use the floo. I hope the Order can get your father back, young man. Now be gone."

Shadow nodded, hugged his brother briefly, and disappeared in a flash of floo fire, whispering the password to get into Grimmauld Place.

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The sitting room wasn't empty. Ron and Hermione were cleaning. Both looked up as the floo flared to life and Shadow stepped through. Their mouths fell open in shock. Everyone was furiously looking for him for three days - even the twins were strangely subdued and worried - and here Shadow was, stepping casually into the sitting room.

"I'll get the Headmistress," Hermione said before running from the room.

"Hey, man," Ron said with a worried frown. "You okay? What happened? Where were you?"

"Where's McGonagall?" Shadow demanded, ignoring the redhead's questions. He started moving toward the door.

"They're all out looking for you! No one's here except us? What happened to you?"

Shadow sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He came back into the room and sat down in the nearest chair.

Ron came forward and stood near him. "Hey? Shadow, what happened? Are you okay?"

He was about to answer when the twins and Ginny came running into the room. They were all smiling happily. Ron scowled at them in warning and for once they listened to him and didn't jump on their long-lost friend as they wanted to do. That didn't stop their questions, though.

"What happened?" Fred demanded.

"Lucius Malfoy ambushed us. He used a portkey."

Hermione gasped, her hands over her mouth. "Oh, Shadow…"

The teen shook his head, making his curls bounce. "I wasn't hurt. They left me in a room and just forgot about me, believe it or not."

"Shadow!" Minerva and Remus came rushing into the room, Hermione jumping aside to let them in. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but my father is still with the Death Eaters. I think something's really wrong."

"Do you know where you were taken? How did this happen?" Minerva asked gently.

"Lucius Malfoy ambushed us with a portkey from the lift. I don't really know where he took us. We were in caverns, caves. When I escaped, I found a cave opening and I was about two hundred feet above the ocean. It was crashing against the cliff. It was night when I fled and I got a good look at
the stars in the sky. That might help us find out where I was."

"I'll go get a Pensieve," Remus offered and hurried from the room again.

"I can't believe a portkey worked in the Ministry! There is treachery at work here," McGonagall hissed furiously, her fists clenched. "That was very smart, Shadow, looking at the sky for clues to your location. You did the absolutely right thing in getting away. We will get your father back; don't you worry. But I still need to know a few things. How did you escape? Where did you go afterward?"

"Someone came into the room I was being held in. The lights had gone out long ago, it was pitch black, so I didn't see who it was. Well, I had been waiting for a chance like that and attacked."

"Wandlessly?" a voice growled.

Shadow looked over as Moody limped into the room. There was a darkness in the old Auror's emotions, but Shadow wasn't sure what it was. It was too vague. "No," he shook his head. It was best to keep as low a profile as possible. "My father taught me some hand-to-hand. I attacked him and knocked him out. It was only possible because he wasn't expecting it and couldn't see me. After running around the caverns for a while, I finally found an exit."

"You didn't look for your father?" Moody growled accusingly.

"That's enough," Minerva said sharply, her eyes cutting toward him.

"I looked, but I found the exit first. I was going to go back and look for my father, but…" Shadow hung his head and rubbed tiredly at his face.

The others in the room looked on with concern. Well, all of them except Moody.

Shadow wasn't faking. Just remembering what happened to Draco… It made him want to scream. "I heard someone coming," he said tightly. "I was really scared and I backed up. I fell."

"Oh no!" Hermione and Ginny cried quietly.

Shadow nodded and let a tremor enter his voice. Might as well play this up. "I don't… I don't really know what happened after that… I just woke up the next day in a strange bed. It turns out that it was the Longbottoms' house. I met a student named Neville and his grandmother. They fed me and let me use the floo to get back here."

"Neville!" Ginny smiled and then blushed as her brothers made faces at her.

"That must have been very difficult," Minerva murmured and reached over to press his shoulder.

"I just want to get my father back," Shadow said firmly, meeting everyone's eyes. *And Draco,* he thought privately. *I will get them both back.*

"Are you sure he wants to be brought back?" Moody asked.

Shadow jumped to his feet furious, but, surprisingly, it was Remus who spoke first. He came into the room with the Pensieve in his hands. His face was hard and his eyes were flashing. "Severus is not a Death Eater, Alastor. Your accusations and insinuations are getting tiring."

"A snake can't shed its stripes," the old man growled back furiously.

"Funny," Fred drawled. "I thought snakes…"
"...shred their skins frequently," George grinned.

"Alastor, if you aren't going to be helpful, I'm going to have to ask you to resign from the Order," Minerva said, standing ramrod straight. The whole room froze, eyes wide. Even Shadow was surprised.

"Excuse me?" Mad-Eye whispered, hostility spiking around him.

"I need people who can gauge reality and help me strategize. If you can no longer do that, then you are a liability."

Shadow spoke softly beside her. "My father was a Death Eater only because he didn't know what it meant to be one. When he did understand, he fled and has done nothing but break himself over and over again for the cause of the Light. My father saw first hand what would happen to a world under the hands of Death Eaters and he is now dedicated, heart and soul, to standing against that. He's a hero in his own right and I'm sick of you all looking down on him because of your hateful bigotry!"

"That's enough," Minerva interrupted. "Alastor understands your point. And he understand mine. Severus has been tested again and again. I will say this clearly. Albus abused his power over Shadow's father, and it is only due to Severus's character and sense of morals that he is still in this country helping to make a stand against the Death Eaters. Is that clear enough, Alastor?"

The old man stood there just staring at her.

"Go, Alastor. Spread this message to the others you've been whispering with. Yes. I know of it."

"Very well." The old Auror bowed and left the room without another word.

In the tense silence that followed, Shadow took a deep breath, calming himself. It felt really, really good to know that there were some people who were willing to stand up for his father. He was beginning to despair. "That reminds me, though. The Ministry put a monitoring device on my father. Can we track him with that?"

"What?" McGonagall demanded furiously. "I'll look into this immediately. Remus, will you help Shadow with the Pensieve? Bring me the image of the stars as soon as possible. Fred, George, go to Hogwarts and get Madam Pomfrey. I want her to check Shadow over. Ginny, can you return home and bring back your mother? We're going to have a meeting tonight and we'll need a large dinner."

Everyone nodded and McGonagall gave them stern looks before flooing to the Ministry. Ginny went after her. The twins went third, winking and smiling at Shadow. The curly-haired teen managed a weak smile in return. In less than two minutes, there were only Remus, Ron, and Hermione left.

"Are you ready?" Remus asked gently. His golden eyes were worried.

Shadow could tell he was itching to run diagnostic spells on him. "I'm fine. Let's do this."

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Draco groaned and opened his eyes. It was a harder task than he ever remembered it being. At first he didn't recognize the room. It was small and round with stone walls like a dungeon. His room at school was square and felt more comfortable, so he couldn't be at Hogwarts. Just as he discounted the school as his location, Severus stepped into his line of sight. His hair was greasier than normal and his face was haggard.

Shock hit his system as Draco remembered everything.
He flinched, a cry rising in his throat. Severus reached forward slowly, but that didn't matter. Draco hunched in and let out a little scream. He would have jerked away, but his body felt a bit numb. His mind flashed back to being tied, helpless and still, as the whip came down… again… and again… and again. He'd never felt such pure, unadulterated physical pain before in his life.

"Shhh…" Severus said softly, wrapping the distressed teen in his arms.

Two years ago, before Shadow came into his life, he would have left it with laying his hand on the child's head. Things were different now, though. Draco was no longer just his student. He was Shadow's friend. He had rescued his son when Severus had failed him. How could he have trusted Lucius's mind at face value when Severus knew the man was unhinged? He owed Draco some measure of relief for that alone.

"It's over. It's over, Draco. You were strong and now it is over."

Draco shuddered and shivered in his professor's arms. He was already calming down, the initial reaction to the painful memory passing. He pulled away. The dark-eyed man reached for a potion. Draco took it without question. He sat up in the bed and rested his back against the headboard. He wasn't really surprised when the move didn't hurt at all. He could still feel vague welts against his skin, but they were healing quickly from the torn and bloody lashes they once were.

"How long was I out?" he rasped.

"Ten hours," Severus answered. His face was expressionless and cool.

Draco relaxed still further. "What's going on?"

"I've been set to making complicated potions. I don't know exactly their effects, but the ingredients would suggest an attempt at eternal life or possibly invulnerability to wounds. Wizards have been trying to come up with such spells and potions for centuries, of course. I'm not completely sure that these will successfully achieve such results either."

Draco nodded. He tilted his head against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. Whatever his father was doing, it didn't sound good for the world or Shadow. He mentally shied away from the memory of his father's laugh, his rage, the whip…

Fear and hate churned in his stomach and he clenched his fists as sweat broke out across his brow. Panic was threatening to choke off his air supply and bring up bile from his stomach, but he forced himself to calm down. He'd had a similar reaction after finally being released from weeks of being placed under his father's Imperius Curse. He was a Malfoy and fear would not rule him.

"You need to rest," Severus broke the silence. "I know you will still be in some pain. It will linger for at least a week because I didn't have time to make the healing potions as strong as they could have been. If you wish to leave that bed undamaged, I suggest you stay in it."

Draco smiled wryly as the man swept from the room. Severus was so full of it. The man would never give him a potion that was less than perfect. The proof of this was the fact that he wasn't in any pain. Snape was merely giving him an alibi to reasonably avoid his father and stay safe in this room. Draco sank gratefully back under his covers and pressed his face into his pillow. If he cried a little bit, at least there was no one there to witness the moment of weakness.

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Shadow couldn't sleep. He knew everyone was doing everything that could possibly be done to find his father (and Draco, though they didn't know it). Professor Sinistra was examining the memories of
the cloudy night sky he had glimpsed in an attempt to gauge latitude and longitude. Most of the Order was scouring the most popular ocean caverns and cliffs by hand. And then there was the Headmistress who was working with Remus and a few other stronger wizards in the Order to try and activate the monitoring anklet.

(Fudge claimed to have forgotten to activate it after the hearing and now the powerful wards Severus was trapped behind was preventing the activation spell to work. Fudge had no explanation for how a portkey was able to work inside its walls, and he was sweating bullets as the Wizengamot took a good hard look at him. Fudge was promising to do everything he could to punish the ones responsible and make sure nothing like that could happen again. He also had dedicated fifteen of his Aurors to Minerva to help aid the search.)

But it wasn't enough. None of it was.

Every time he closed his eyes, Shadow saw Draco getting hit by his father. Half of him wanted to know why the blond had done it, but the other half already knew. This was the same person who struck down Dumbledore to save Severus. Draco gave him dance lessons, laughed with him about Skeeter's humiliation, and worked beside him in companionable silence for hours over a basilisk corpse.

Considering all that, Shadow wasn't shocked about Draco's self-sacrifice. And then there was his father. The loss of Severus… The man who saved him, who protected his sanity, who did so much for him that he couldn't even begin to list it all… Birthdays, guidance, protection, a home, food, gifts, happiness, memories of a loving mother… Severus was the one person he couldn't bear to lose.

What did Severus get in return? He got treated as a criminal by the Ministry and had to taint the memory of his beloved and cherished wife. He was forced to constantly exhaust himself keeping Shadow safe and healing his broken mind.

Shadow closed his eyes tight and leaned his forehead against the library door, grief welling in his throat, choking him.

"Look, I'm not saying it's his fault," Ron's voice came muffled through the wood. "He's cursed, though. I feel bad for the bloke, I do, but you're not going to convince me that it means nothing that his eyes are like that."

"It's just melanin, Ronald!" Hermione cried, obviously frustrated.

"I get that!" Ron yelled back. "You've explained it, all right! I get all the medical stuff about eye color. That still doesn't change the fact that he's cursed! Think about it, Mione. He was born because his father… you know, forced his mother…"

"Ron!" Hermione gasped, horrified.

"Well, it's true! I overheard Diggle talking about it. Then his mother and sister are killed and he has to go into hiding. When he finally comes out into the open, he's captured. Now his dad's probably dead. That's got to be the worst luck in the world. How do you explain that, huh?"

"He's not cursed! That's just coincidence. Bad things happen to people with eyes the same color, too! Think about Harry. He's had awful luck, as bad as Shadow's. We don't even know if he's alive! He could have died at fourteen," she said, her voice trembling with tears.

"Hermione…" Ron said gently.

"No! I'm not finished." Her voice firmed with righteous anger. Shadow almost smiled, remembering
all the times in the past when he had seen her like that. "Mad-Eye has bad luck. He's so badly
injured, not even magic could cure him. He's maimed for life. And Professor Snape has bad luck…"

"I get it your point," Ron responded tiredly, "but Mad-Eye and Snape both chose their bad luck,
wouldn't you say? Snape chose to be a Death Eater and Mad-Eye chose to be an Auror. They
decided to do high-risk things."

"Don't be dumb, Ronald. Shadow isn't cursed. He's had it hard, but it has nothing to do with his
eyes. It has to do with that evil, vile, murderous monster! It's all his fault and I don't care what you
say. Shadow needs support and friends. We all need to stick together. This curse you are so afraid of
isn't coming from inside, it's coming from outside, and it's name is V-v-voldemort."

"Hermione!" Ron gasped shocked.

"It's just a name!" she defended.

Without warning, the door was yanked open and Shadow staggered, almost falling into the distressed
witch. Hermione's eyes went wide with horror and her face turned beat red. Shadow shifted
uncomfortably. Wincing at the strength of her emotions even through his shielding. Hermione was
too shocked and mortified to speak, and Ron was looking away, arms crossed and face flushed with
embarrassment as well.

Shadow cleared his throat. "I… ah, couldn't sleep…" he gestured at the rows of books behind them.
"I thought reading might help me relax."

"Shadow…" Hermione gathered herself and tears were rising in her eyes. Shame and regret, and a
surprisingly strong sense of sorrow, swirled around her. "I'm so sorry about your father. It had
nothing to do with you. I hope you know that."

That wasn't true, of course. The only reason why they were at the Ministry was because Shadow
needed to validate his existence as Severus's son. If he had remained Harry Potter and sucked it up,
they never would have had to go there. Then Draco wouldn't have had to come help him. Maybe he
was a curse for others.

Ron shifted uncomfortably. In the dim light of the hall and the library, he couldn't tell what color the
other boy's eyes were. All he could see was a kid who had been captured and probably tortured or
something with the way Poppy and Remus had closeted away together after the teen's examination.
Shadow's father was missing, possibly dead, and he had no family left, all of them murdered. He was
stuck in a house with strangers, and from the guilty, miserable expression now on his face, Ron
could tell Shadow did believe in the curse, at least a little bit.

Suddenly, Ron was angry. "All right already!" he spat furiously. "You need me to admit it? Fine! I
was wrong and being stupid. Again! This has nothing to do with your stupid eyes, Shadow. The
color of something can't change anything or we could paint You-Know-Who pink and be done with
it."

Hermione was looking at him with a huge smile that lit up her whole face. Ron blushed. Whenever
Hermione looked at him like that - and trust me, it was very rare - he was forcibly reminded of why
he loved her.

"Thanks," Shadow said bemused.

Ron smiled wryly at him. "Look. I'm an idiot. I never mean to be, but I just can't seem to get away
from it." He rubbed the back of his head, ruffling his short, red hair. "I'm sorry about before. Can we
try this again?"

The curly-haired teen smiled and offered his hand.

Ron stepped forward and shook it, grateful he had been forgiven.

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Neville flooed into Grimmauld Place after his grandmother. His whole life had changed radically…

Determined to help his brother, he had gone outside as soon as Shadow left and went into a trance. It wasn't like searching for Demon. That monster had a distinct aura that repelled his Earth sense. Trying to find Professor Snape and Draco wouldn't be that easy at all.

Unknown to him, the garden around him grew more vibrant. Leaves and vegetables grew fuller and more lush. The trees around their property whispered loudly in a breeze that wasn't there. Augusta had come out to fetch him for lunch and could only stare in absolute wonderment. The feel around her grandson was subtle but incredible. It felt like standing next to a gentle sun, his power gently warming her skin. Algie came out as well and the two of them watched the grandson they had feared would never amount to anything.

They stood next to the garden for hours, but were unable to leave. Around midnight, Neville stiffened and slowly the force and heat of his Earth magic diminished until he opened his eyes. They were sparkling in a way completely unlike the boy they knew.

"What was that, Neville?" Augusta asked softly.

Neville stood with shocking grace. "Mamaw," he said. It had been years since he used the affectionate term. "Uncle Algie, I didn't really know how to tell you, but… I'm an Elemental Wizard, keyed to the element Earth. That's why I have trouble with wand magic."

"What were you doin' with it?" Algie gestured, pale and wide-eyed.

"I was searching for Shadow's father and his friend who got kidnapped. Wards and stuff that make a location invisible or untraceable doesn't work against me." He met his grandmother's eyes. "I think I've found them, and I'm going to need your help."

… And that's when everything had changed. His grandmother agreed and revealed she knew where the Order's Headquarters was because she used to be a part of the Order during the First War. They had asked her to come back a few months ago and she had agreed. She had been gathering information from many sources and feeding it to the Headmistress.

Neville never would have guessed it. His grandmother was very much against sneaking around. She was a pure Gryffindor and only respected direct action. Guess he wasn't the only one with secrets. Her attitude had changed completely, as well. She didn't talk down to him at all, and best of all, she wasn't constantly questioning him.

She didn't ask how he found out about his strange magic or ask why he wanted her to cover for him and say she had discovered the location instead of him or ask why he was so determined to help Shadow. It was incredible and shocking. He had always dreamed of finally earning her respect, but now that he had it, he felt almost more nervous than before. He had no idea how to react to the change in her treatment of him.

They stepped out into a dark parlor and Augusta twirled her wand above her head, sending white sparks flying from the room with slight whistling noises. To summon every Order member in the
house, she explained. Neville nodded and had to force himself not to fidget nervously. He was further surprised by the first person to arrive.

"Ginny!" he blushed.

"Neville?" she came forward with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"You are a bit young for the Order," Augusta sniffed disapprovingly.

"Oh, I was just getting a drink of water when I saw the sparks. I thought I'd see who arrived." She smiled charmingly up at the forbidding woman.

Neville opened his mouth to ask a question, but he was cut off by the appearance of a tall black man and the Headmistress. More wizards and witches came in after them. Ginny took Neville's hand and tugged him from the room when her mother glared at her sternly. Flipping her long red hair over her shoulder, she huffed as she made her way upstairs.

"They think we're babies or something, I swear!" she growled in annoyance. "I'm fourteen for Merlin's sake! I can handle listening to a simple conversation. It's not like I'm running out to do battle or anything."

Neville smiled at her fiery temper. He had missed her so much. "Why didn't you say you were here? You never mentioned it in your letters."

"They wouldn't let me. Secrets and everything." She shrugged.

"Do you know where Shadow is?"

"Shadow?" She turned to face him curiously. "That's right. You met him when he crashed into your house."

"Yeah." Neville nodded, squirming. He hated lying to her. "I have information for him."

She smiled and wrapped him in a hug, standing on tip toe to kiss his cheek. "I'm glad you came. I've missed you." Neville turned beat red. "Come on." She laughed and tugged him down the hall. "He's probably in the library."

"Shadow!" Neville called, getting the curly-haired teen's attention. Shadow, Ron, and Hermione looked up in surprise. "My Gran had experts come and trace your Apparation route back to the source. We know where you came from! She talking to the Order right now."

Shadow jumped to his feet so fast the chair fell back with a bang. He bolted down the hall toward the meeting room. The door was locked and he growled before pounding on it. He could have torn the wards down, but it would have exhausted him and he didn't want to reveal how powerful he really was yet.

"Mr. Snape!" Minerva scolded angrily as she opened the door. "What do you think you are doing?"

"I want to know what you've found out. He's my father!"

She stared down at him, her lips drawn in a thin line. "We will do everything we can, Shadow. You will have to trust us."

"Please. I can't just sit around wondering what's going on," he begged.

"Very well." She sighed and opened the door. Shadow slipped into the room quickly. Minerva
glared at the other teens. "You may all go to bed."

They looked at each other before Fred and George ran for their Extendable Ears.

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The room was so crowded that wizards and witches stood along the walls, all the seats around the table taken. Maps were sprawled out along the table and wands were pointing and highlighting sections. Professor Sinistra confirmed the location. Without knowing the exact time he had looked up at the sky, it was hard for her to pinpoint the exact location, but she was able to narrow it down to a large stretch of land, which the coordinates Augusta had brought had fallen within.

Three Order members had already been dispatched to scout the area around the cliff and would return shortly with more information about the defenses they were up against. The Headmistress was certain that this was the home base for all the disappearing Death Eaters and was determined to strike them before they could finish coordinating whatever attack they were planning. It was going to be a full-scale assault.

Shadow stood silent and pale, listening to the men and women plan the battle. They studied the landscape and were already making portkeys to the area and second portkeys to bring them back. Three witches and one wizard nodded and slipped out of the room to start preparing all the sitting rooms and parlors as temporary medical rooms to care for the injured.

"We know for sure there are at least twenty-seven Death Eaters missing, but we cannot be certain they haven't been recruiting all this time," Minerva said solemnly as she looked around the room. "We will most likely be outnumbered, but we have the element of surprise. I want you to capture as many Death Eaters as you can. If you can't capture them, kill them. The first priority is to rescue Severus Snape and any other prisoners we may come across. Our second priority is to look for any information pertaining to Harry Potter. Retreat if things get too hot. I don't want any casualties. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," the room answered immediately.

The door opened and the scouts returned bearing bad news, one of which was Bill Weasley and another was Sirius Black. Shadow's eyes went wide with shock, but he had to admit that his godfather looked healthier than he had since Azkaban. His hair was thick and shiny, his skin was tan, and he wasn't skeletal by any means. He was thin and lithe and moved with a confident grace.

"He's innocent," a witch with multi-colored hair whispered to him. "Pettigrew set him up. Remus got Minerva in contact with him when you and your dad went missing. Sirius is one of our best scouts, always has been. He's my cousin, didn't you know? I'm Tonks, by the way."

Shadow didn't respond, he was too busy listening to the report Bill was giving. The caves were more tightly warded than he had ever seen. Anti-Apparation, anti-portkey, Imperturbable Charms, Un-plottable Wards on the caves, while surveillance and trap spells were active from every side. It was a fortress. Everyone grumbled unhappily at this, but it wasn't really a surprise. They hadn't expected less.

"I don't understand. How did I Apparate out then?" Shadow spoke up.

"It seems like there is a small space, about twenty feet wide, between the outside defenses and the inside defenses where there are no spells," Sirius answered. "You must have fallen into that area between the two that is clear."
"Lucky bastard," a wizard muttered next to him. Shadow ignored him.

"You couldn't find any weak points to hit?" Minerva asked.

“No." Bill shook his head regretfully. "The parameter is whole and the spells that are protecting it are layered. There were a few spots weaker than the rest, but they are not soft by any measure."

"I think I can help with that." Sirius grinned. "I have some family heirlooms that might be able to dismantle most of these wards and traps. We already know the coordinates to get into that open space between the two sets of wards. I'll portkey outside the parameter and then Apparate into the blank space Shadow came from. If it works, we can key most of our portkeys into that space."

There was protests around the room. It was a dangerous move. He could land himself right on a trap or splinch himself since he had never been there personally, but Minerva overruled them and agreed to the plan. This was a war and you had to be ready to make risky moves in order to win. Sirius grinned and left the room again, carrying one of the newly made portkeys with him. Tonks went with him to fetch the magical devices he had mentioned.

"All right everyone. You all know we are up against some heavy odds. You have two hours to prepare. We leave at three. Any of you not willing be a part of the attack, come speak to me and I'll find you something else to do. Dismissed."

Shadow pushed his way through the crowd filing out the door. He made his way to the Headmistress and was surprised to see no one had stayed behind to ask for a reassignment. The only ones left were the two wizards and two witches still making portkeys.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "I really appreciate all your doing to get my father back."

"He is an important part of this Order, Shadow. Don't think we don't value him," she told him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Try and get some rest."

Shadow nodded and left the room. He quickly made his way back upstairs. The twins' door opened and they pulled him in. Everyone was there and they all looked either serious or frightened.

"You heard?" he asked.

They nodded, indicating the twins’ Extendable Ears.

"I'm going to need your help."

"With what?" Ginny asked, wide-eyed.

"I'm going with them," he answered and showed them the portkey he had swiped. "This will take me outside the parameter wards. I can Apparate into the blind spot on my own. I've been there before."

"Shadow!" Hermione gasped. "You can't!"

"It's too dangerous, mate," Ron agreed.

"Shadow, I know how you feel," Ginny said gently, "but you'll likely only get in the way."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," Shadow told them, meeting their eyes. "I'll be fine. If I get into trouble, I'll get out. I'm going after my father. I don't exactly trust the Order. They could kill him and say it was an accident or something."

"We're with you," Fred and George spoke together.
“Thanks.” Shadow smiled at them. "I need you all to cover for me. They're going to be suspicious about my absence, but I'm confident that together you can manage. I'll get back as soon as I can. I don't plan to get you in trouble."

"I have to get back home," Neville said regretfully.

Ginny hugged him, making her brothers catcall and tease her. She ignored them, but Neville turned red again. "Come back some time?"

"I'll try." He smiled and kissed her cheek quickly before hurrying from the room.

"Wait up," Shadow called, going after him. They walked side-by-side downstairs. Shadow didn't speak until they were almost to the flooing parlor. "Thank you, Nev."

"I don't really have to go home," Neville said suddenly. "I'm coming with you. I'll go home so no one gets suspicious and I'll meet you there."

"How?" Shadow asked. "I only got one portkey."

"I didn't have time to really talk to you before everything happened… Well, you know the way I found you at the Dursleys? That's how I found the caves."

"I thought you said…"

"I didn't want anyone else to know. My Gran's covering for me."

Shadow could only stare.

"Anyway, I can kinda use my magic to appear wherever I want. I turn into an oak and then take over the body of an oak wherever I want and transform back."

"My god," Shadow breathed. "That's incredible!"

"So I'll meet you there, all right? Don't go in without me," Neville insisted.

"It's going to be dangerous," Shadow warned softly.

"You can't go by yourself. That's just stupid. No one will know you're even there. What if something happens? You won't have any way to get help."

"All right." Shadow sighed and ran his hands roughly through his curls. "Okay. I'll wait for you. I plan to portkey fifteen minutes earlier than the Order, so in about… thirty minutes."

Neville nodded and flooed away without another word. Shadow shook his head. Neville could still surprise him; he had never felt so grateful to have the shy, brave Gryffindor as his brother.

Shadow hurried back upstairs to his things. He grabbed a backpack and started stuffing it with things he thought he might need, like healing potions and his invisibility cloak. Then he quickly got dressed in tight black pants and a long-sleeved black shirt, hoping it would grant him some measure of camouflage. He grabbed his daggers and was strapping one to each hip when a knock sounded on the door. He impatiently threw it open.

“Hey.” Fred grinned. "We thought you…"

"…could use some ammo.” George handed him a box. "There's fireworks, artificial swamps, trick candy…"
"…explosives, smoke screens, Extendable Ears, and other nifty stuff," Fred finished.

"Thank you. This is perfect!" Shadow grinned and stuffed the box into his pack. "You got things handled here?"

"You can count on us." Fred smiled and hugged the teen.

"Just come back safe. Our lives would be boring without you," George added with a dramatic sigh.

Shadow laughed and pulled away. He made sure his bag was tight on his back before activating the portkey. He disappeared, leaving the twins staring at his empty room with unusually worried frowns.

Chapter end.
Broken Perceptions

Shadow appeared on the downslope of the cliff. He could hear the ocean a quarter of a mile away and taste salt in the air. The ground was rocky and grassy, slightly moist from dew. It was two forty-five in the morning, the moon already below the horizon, leaving the landscape shrouded in darkness. He could hardly see ten feet in front of him.

He saw no trees and for a moment panicked. How was Neville going to find him? But then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. There! Something was… It was a sapling! It was growing straight out of the ground at rapid speed, unfurling and sprouting. Within ten minutes, a fairly large oak stood where none had before and silently transformed into Neville. Shadow could only stare in shock. He knew his brother was powerful, but this was incredible.

"Are you okay?" Shadow asked, moving to support his brother.

Neville looked pale and was out of breath, but he was otherwise all right. "We'd better hurry. We have about four minutes until the Order starts showing up. What's your plan?"

"I can Apparate to where I fell. I have my broom and I'll jump on it, hopefully before I hit the water. Lucius already keyed me through the Impenetrable Ward, so I'll just fly through the cave opening. Can you do this Earth traveling-thing to find me in there? I don't think the wards will let you in physically, but if you can go under them, or around them, or whatever it is you do, that would be good. Otherwise, I'll wait for you inside and you can come in when the Order breaks through the wards on the caves."

"Okay." Neville nodded firmly. "See you inside. Don't forget to wait for me!"

"I won't." Shadow knew how dangerous this was, but doing anything else was unacceptable. He just hoped his brother wouldn't be hurt, caught in the middle.

He slipped his backpack off his shoulder and reached in for his broom. Unshrinking it, he took a deep breath and Apparated, vividly recalling the mouth of the cave, the rush of wind, and the hungry roar of the ocean.

And then he was falling for a second time.

Heart rocketing in his chest, he shoved the broom between his legs and screamed, "Up!"

The broom jerked violently, almost flinging him off, then he was careening forward toward the rocky cliff-face. He screamed again as he pulled up as hard as he could. Water sprayed into his face, soaked his right pant leg. His left knee scrapped painfully along the wall, and then he was soaring upwards.

Panting, he brought the broom to a hover.

An explosion rocked the night, a bright flare of light - orange and purple - like candle flames. The Order had arrived. Desperately, he searched for the mouth of the cave, but it was un-seeable, masked by spells. Closing his eyes, he tentatively probed the wall with his magic, looking for a thicker magical buildup and… Yes! He shot forward and held his breath.

Just as he was about to crash, he shut his eyes and gasped in relief as he shot through nothing but air.
Shaking, Shadow dismounted and quickly shrunk his broom, returning it to his bag. He listened. He could hear the battle outside only vaguely, muffled by the thick rock. There was no movement inside near him that he could tell.

Taking a deep breath, he allowed himself to crouch and examine his knee. His pants were shredded and the skin was trickling blood. Again he reached for his bag and quickly patched it with a spelled gauze pad. He jerked in surprise as a tree began to grow a foot beside him. Scowling at himself, he forced himself calm.

Neville crouched beside him, his face dripping with sweat, and whispered in his ear, "About half of the Order is attacking the perimeter as a distraction to the south. The rest are Apparating into the blind spot to the east right before the main entrance and attacking the wards on the caves themselves."

"Good. We're more north than east. If we do this right, we shouldn't run into too many Death Eaters or the Order." He stood and offered a hand up to his brother. Neville took it. Shadow pulled out the Invisibility Cloak and flung it around their shoulders. He wasn't a First-year anymore and the cloak couldn't hide them both completely. Thankfully Neville was also wearing all black. Hopefully their shoes and about two inches of the bottom of their pants would go unnoticed in the dark caves.

Silently, the two teens crept forward, going deeper into enemy territory. Shadow kept all his senses as open as he could make them, especially his Empathy. He could feel the panic, fear, and affronted rage mixing and swirling in the caves before them. Faint from distance, battle adrenaline and joy, mingled with rage and hate above and to the side. It was exhausting and slightly disorientating, but it was worth it. He knew when a Death Eater approached them long before their ears picked up anything.

Shadow flung his arm out and pulled Neville against the wall.

As the figure in a black hood and shining white mask came around the corner, Shadow lifted his wand. Neville's eyes went wide, his fear spiking so high that it blanketed the storm of emotion coming from everywhere else. Shadow grit his teeth and cast the strongest binding spell he knew, following it closely with a silencing spell and summoning the Death Eater's wand and mask.

Carefully, Shadow closed down his Empathy and shakily ran his hand over his face. He had been inches away from overloading.

"Why did you do that?" Neville hissed.

"We need him to take us to my father and Draco," Shadow snapped. He tore the cloak off and stalked over to the man who lay helpless on the cold stone floor. Shadow couldn't help smirking; it served the bastard right after locking him away in the small room for days without water or light.

The man looked completely average, brown hair and eyes, unremarkable face. He could have been in his mid-twenties or mid-thirties. And he had a completely average expression of fear on his face, but that drained away into obvious anger when he saw it was only a teen who had taken him down. His eyes communicated threats.

Shadow tisked and knelt down by his head. "I'm going to give you good advice. Think clearly of the location of Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. Otherwise, this is going to hurt. You see, I haven't practiced this very much." That said, he gripped the man's face and stared into his eyes. Shadow carefully pushed his consciousness forward, leaving behind the protections of his own mind and slipped behind the eyes before him.
It was hard. Hard to leave his own space, hard to push into a foreign mind that naturally resisted his presence. He clawed his way forward an inch at a time, instantly realizing that though he studied this process from books and experienced Severus doing it to him several times, he had no great skill or understanding of what he was supposed to be doing. If the Death Eater had any Occlumency skill, this would have been impossible.

Neville bit his lip hard as the man went rigid underneath Shadow. Neville stood fretfully, terrified another Death Eater was going to happen upon them. Shadow was panting with effort, the muscles on the back of his neck standing out as he strained slowly forward, his face lowering ever so slowly toward the Death Eater's.

Neville almost jumped out of his skin completely when the man started screaming, blood slowly oozing out of his nose. He frantically cast a Silencing Charms around them. He didn't think it was a good sign that Shadow's charm had failed. He wanted to jerk his brother away from the man, but he knew enough to know that forcing mental connections apart would hurt both people.

*Hurry up, hurry up,* the thought frantically, turning to watch the mouth of the hallway in case the man's screams had garnered attention.

Shadow gasped and finally retreated back into his own mind. He felt heavy and his mind oversaturated with things that didn't belong there. He had no idea how Severus, or anyone for that matter, could stand it. But he had what he needed to know, among a wealth of stuff he didn't, like the man's favorite color and his pet's name.

"Let's go," he croaked and forced himself to stand.

It wasn't hard to let the information he didn't want metaphorically drain out his ears. As more and more of Brandon's memories and thoughts spilled from him, leaving only vague impressions, his disorientation slowly lessened. He blinked and was surprised to realize Neville was supporting him in a weird parody of a hug. Shadow quickly jerked upright on his own power and wiped at the sweat dripping into his eyes.

"I know where they are," he explained.

"What about him?" Neville gestured to the Death Eater lying unconscious on the floor.

"Leave him. I don't think he'll be coherent for a while even if he wakes up," Shadow answered with a shrug and moved forward, turning down the right hand corridor.

Neville frowned. He wasn't comfortable with Shadow's casual dismissal of the damage he had caused. Injuring another person's mind was one of the most evil things there was. He thought of his parents and clenched his fists. He was definitely talking to his brother when this was all over with. They could have asked for the information, or threatened the man for it, or tried a tracking spell. Something!

Shadow was unaware of Neville's distress. He was completely focused on the task at hand. They had to dodge six more Death Eaters, all moving quickly to either escape or defend the caves. They even caught a glimpse of Tonks down a conjoined hallway. She was cackling madly as she chased a Death Eater in full retreat.

Finally, they reached the door Shadow had learned of within Brandon's mind. He quickly checked for spells and found none. He flung it open and stepped into the room. It was bigger than the one he had been locked in and had furniture: a bed, a dresser, and a second door was open revealing a bathroom. Draco was laying on his stomach, sound asleep.
Shadow hurried over, Neville shutting the door behind them, and reached for his friend's shoulder. He froze, his hand hovering an inch above bare skin. Draco lay topless, the covers coming halfway up his back. Long, red welts criss-crossed his shoulders. Shadow felt all the blood drain from his face. It was as if time itself stopped. His fingers moved of their own accord and pulled the blanket down to the blond's waist. The welts covered the whole of his back, the skin tender and still healing.

Draco had been whipped.

Draco stirred and opened his eyes. He felt sleepy still and suspected Professor Snape's healing draught had been mixed with sleep inducing ingredients. He turned over languidly, only to freeze, eyes going wide. Shadow stood beside his bed, looking down at him. He was sweaty and disheveled, but it was the look in his blue and green eyes that arrested him. They were utterly devastated. Draco sat up quickly, blushing with shame.

"Your father?" Shadow whispered distantly. He felt like he was watching all of this from within a Pensieve. Like he wasn't really standing there.

"What are you doing here?" Draco demanded, ignoring the question. He quickly got out of bed and went to the dresser for a shirt and robe. Partly to get away from his friend's expression.

"We need to hurry," Neville spoke. Draco jumped, startled. He hadn't noticed the quiet Gryffindor standing there. "We still need to find Professor Snape."

"What are you two doing?" the blond demanded again, now fully angry. He had done all this to get Shadow away from this place and here he was with Longbottom, of all people!

"The Order is attacking at full strength. They are determined to break this stronghold. I wanted to make sure that you and my father got out unharmed and not as prisoners," Shadow explained. He was still staring down at the bed.

"What are you doing here?" Draco demanded again, now fully angry. He had done all this to get Shadow away from this place and here he was with Longbottom, of all people!

"The Order is attacking at full strength. They are determined to break this stronghold. I wanted to make sure that you and my father got out unharmed and not as prisoners," Shadow explained. He was still staring down at the bed.

"What are you two doing?" the blond demanded again, now fully angry. He had done all this to get Shadow away from this place and here he was with Longbottom, of all people!

"We need to hurry," Neville insisted. "Do you know where Professor Snape is?"

"Not for sure." Draco shook his head. He tucked his hair behind his ear and readied his wand. "But I know where the labs are. He's usually there."

Shadow nodded and let Draco take the lead. He felt calm, ice spearing through his blood as Demon's laugh resonated through his head. The anger pulsed inside him, seductive and powerful, and all he could think of was that Lucius Malfoy would pay for whipping Draco.

**Flashes of dream-memory sparked behind his eyes. It was as if he stood in the room and watched as Vernon whipped Boy. He couldn't feel the pain, but he watched the too skinny child's skin part, red flowering out in a curtain, sprinkling Vernon and the walls. He heard the short, sharp screams awakened by the lick of the bloody whip - the long tortured moans of pain as the child arched with agony - the gasping sobs when Boy was too exhausted for even screams - as Vernon struck again and again.**

It was as if Demon were riding him, wrapped around his shoulders, his clawed fingers gripping his hair, but the alter wasn't trying to come Out. He was merely sharing the rage, communing with Shadow, whispering to him like he constantly whispered to Boy. In that moment, Shadow saw how Boy and Demon were two different faces of the same entity. Demon was aware of all of Boy's sufferings because he was the pure rage produced by them.
Demon's magic spilled around the cracks of his soul and the flashes behind his eyes were of Draco as the demon's magic summoned them from the very air. Through a hazy mist of red, they watched as Lucius spelled his son violently to the floor and physically tore his robe and shirt from his body. Yelled words of disappointment and rage for letting "the Snape brat" escape… a snap of long fingers and a submissive Death Eater brought the whip. It was thick and vicious looking. It tore through Draco's skin like butter and his screams rang through the air. Faster and faster, more blood flowed, and the screams became keens of agony, became weak moans, became helpless wretched sobs. All punctured by sharp yelps and the sharp crack of leather. Lucius grinned manically, madness in his eyes.

The only thing keeping Shadow from hunting down every last Death Eater - This second, this instant! - and making sure they paid was ironically Demon. His alter's whispers and promises of utter destruction for everyone who had ever caused them harm trapped him helplessly in a half-trance of rage. Shadow was caught somewhere between letting Demon Out and staying conscious so that he could get revenge himself.

Neville looked back at his brother, worry tightening his stomach muscles and sweat decorating his brow. His Earth sense was screaming as the faint scent of Demon's magic, the antithesis of Neville's own, wafted around Shadow's form. His brother's face was utterly expressionless and bone white, his eyes looked unfocused as he walked as if in a trance after them. It was like he was a puppet, and Neville literally shook with the fear that at any moment the puppet was going to come roaring to life with demonic intent.

"Draco…" he whispered. He was terrified speaking would tip the balance and wake Demon, but he decided that he couldn't just stand there silent as the worst happened.

The blond glanced back, impatience in his eyes.

"I can s-sense Demon's m-m-magic. I think he's c-cl-close to the surface," Neville explained barely above hearing level.

Draco's eyes went wide and flashed further back to take in Shadow's vacant expression and stiff posture. "Do you have that potion?"

"No. Mine expired," Neville said, wringing his hands nervously.

"Mine, too," Draco hissed furiously. Merlin! As if what they were doing wasn't difficult enough, Shadow was hanging by a thread, about to fall into insanity. They had to find Severus and fast! Dropping all concern about encountering a Death Eater, he began to run.

Their shoes slapped against the stone and they could hear the battle going on all around them. Neville and Draco pleaded with any deity caring enough to listen to keep them clear of the war, but of course their luck could not last. They rounded the corner and Draco literally crashed into a black-robed figure. Neville skid to a stop and practically lunged at his brother, pinning Shadow to the wall, protecting him with his body.

Draco jerked away from the hands that grasped at him and cast a Cutting Hex. The Death Eater dodged and his pale hand came flashing up. Draco let out a battle cry and flung himself backward, rolling and coming up ready to fling another spell, only to realize that the Death Eater merely reached to take off his mask. Severus stared back at him, eyes practically glowing they were so focused.

"We must move," he hissed furiously. "The Order is attacking and this is the only time to make our escape." He tossed his mask to the floor and removed the outer hooded robe. If they were going to run into the Order's arms, he could not look like the enemy. That would be suicidal. He had only
donned the robe so that he could get to Draco more easily.

"Professor… Shadow…" Draco gasped, out of breath. He gestured weakly toward the two shadowed figures huddled against the wall.

Severus froze, eyes widening in shock, before he swooped forward, reaching for his son. His mind raced furiously, imagining all sorts of reasons Draco had said his son's name so desperately. The Longbottom boy was obviously shielding him. Shadow would only ever allow that if he were incapacitated. Severus expected to see gory wounds, his son bleeding out on the verge of death. He flung Longbottom away and grasped his son by the shoulders, quickly looking him over.

Shadow stood dazed, unresponsive to outside stimuli, but Severus saw no physical wound. He hissed and his wand snapped up, casting diagnostic spells, fearing internal bleeding. All that came back was a severely skinned knee. The sound of spell-battle was getting closer. They could make out a few words and screams now instead of just a jumbled sense of noise. Quickly putting his wand away, Severus tangled his fingers in his son's hair by his temple and dipped carefully into his mind.

A swirling storm of rage swept him up immediately. He could sense Shadow's consciousness entangled in the cold entity that was Demon. They revolved around each other slowly, caught together in the eye of the mental storm, focused solely on each other and the fever-dreams of rage and revenge. Blood swirled around their heads, the rhythmic cracking of a whip flashing like lightning, and screams rolling through like thunder. Severus sucked in his breath, recognizing both Boy and Draco in that deadly song.

Severus couldn't get any closer, couldn't reach his son, but he wasn't about to lose him, not now and not to this. "Shadow," he bellowed, throwing his voice forward like a knife, making it a summons. "Shadow Harold Lillium Snape!"

Shadow heard his name like a fresh breeze. With it came the scent of the ocean, reminding him of water. The allowance of thought outside rage and bloodlust fractured his focus from Demon. He stumbled and with bleak horror realized what he had almost done. His brother and Draco were out there! His father and the Order! If Demon had come Out, all of them would be dead as well as the Death Eaters. Demon was never an option! He was unreasoning and utterly insane!

Horrified, Shadow flung himself away and right into his father's mental embrace. Joy flooded through him as he clung to Severus, allowing the man to calm and soothe his mind. Shame bubbled up underneath his happiness. He had come to rescue Severus and Draco, not the other way around! And behind the shame, the remnants of his anger sill simmered because of what Draco had suffered for him.

Severus gently pulled out of his son's mind when he was confident he was in control and stable. Shadow blinked up at him, sweat rolling down his chin. Severus stroked his son's hair once before pulling away. Shadow forced himself to hold still and just catch his breath. It felt like he had run a mile. Neville and Draco stood in battle-ready positions, ready to defend the two Snapes no matter what came. He smiled and gripped his brother's shoulder firmly, both in apology and to reassure Neville that he was all there.

"I made certain to retain your things," Severus said and handed Shadow his jewelry (the portkey ring tuned to his blood, the summoning bracelet, and his piano necklace) and his new wand. "Now come. Follow me quickly."

Shadow put everything in its place and hurried after the other three. "Why can't we use the ring to go home?"
"The Order broke the Impenetrable Wards, but left the anti-Apparation and anti-portkey wards in place. Most likely to keep the Death Eaters easy prey," the Potions Master explained.

"Are you okay?" Shadow asked quietly, coming up behind his father. He noticed that his limp was even more pronounced than normal and his voice deeper with exhaustion.

"I am well," he sneered. "Now hush and pay attention. All of you!"

Neville jumped, surprised at the tone. Shadow scowled and Draco nodded, his wand held steady despite the trembling in his arms and legs. They made their way closer to the sound of battle. Only to find Mad-Eye battling Edmund Lestrange. A nephew of Bellatrix.

The Ex-Auror should have been able to take down the young man without much trouble, but the older man was struggling with his right arm almost completely severed. Blood soaked his side and Severus could see the Auror was about to fall. He wasn't sure if Edmund had given the paranoid old codger the wound, but it didn't matter. He came around the corner and began to attack the Death Eater.

Shadow could have cussed up a storm, seeing who his father was rescuing. There was no doubt in his mind that Moody would turn on Severus as soon as the Death Eater between them was down. He wasn't about to let that happen. He moved to the mouth of the intersection, so that his father wasn't between him and Moody, and prepared to cast a curse as soon as it became necessary.

Draco ran low to the ground over into the opposite tunnel so that he could guard that entrance into this section of the caves. Neville stayed with Shadow. He was trembling and felt sick. Moody's wound made his mind flash back to the Dursleys and the scent of dark spell residue and the battle screams were nerve wracking. He forced himself to stay calm, focusing on protecting Shadow's back.

Edmund fell in a spray of blood, his chest cut open revealing broken ribs and damaged lungs. He had been so busy deflected Severus's curse that Moody's got through. He collapsed with a gurgled scream. Draco's battle call answered as two Death Eaters appeared before him and began flinging curses.

Severus leapt over to help the teen, knowing Draco wouldn't last long against the more experienced Death Eaters. Moody cackled and turned his wand to the Potion Master's back. Shadow ran forward with a roar, blasting the old man back a few feet. Shocked, Moody flung a powerful spell back. Shadow dodged and a furious spell battle began.

This wasn't like dueling Sirius or Remus. It was more like fighting Severus but worse. Even with one arm incapacitated, Moody's casting was fast and, unlike with his father and godfather, Shadow had no means of predicting what the old bastard was going to throw. He flung himself flat as a violet spell flashed over his head. Before he could stand, a second spell came flying at his head, followed by Moody's triumphant laugh.

Neville watched horrified as the spell raced toward his brother. He flung his wandless arm forward and screamed, "No!" His heart twisted in his chest and he gasped, almost falling, as a sheet of rock stabbed up out of the ground about three feet high. The orange spell splashed harmlessly off of it. Shadow had no time to be shocked. He jumped to his feet and bellowed, "Ultimus Dormus!"

Moody was still staring at the rock sheet and didn't block the spell. He collapsed into a deep slumber.

The only problem with spells like Petrificus Totalus, Stupefy, and other elementary spells that the
younger children were taught at school was the fact that trained adults can break free of them within
a minute or two. Thankfully, Shadow knew stronger, adult-level spells from his hours of studying in
Hogwarts’ and Severus’s library. That sleep spell would last ten hours or until the old Auror was
released. He turned to face his brother and cried out in dismay.

Neville sat hunched against the wall. His face was white as snow and his eyes were glassy. Shadow
skid up to him and knelt. He put his fingers against this brother's pulse point and sighed in relief
when he felt the steady thump. Neville groaned and his head fell limply sideways as he passed out.

Worried, Shadow looked over to his father. They finally felled the last Death Eater and Severus
immediate spun around. His angular face was twisted with anger. Shadow scowled as the man swept
down on him. Draco met his eyes briefly. He looked older, and though Shadow felt a pang of
sadness at that, he also felt fierce pride.

"What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing?"

"He was going to attack you!" Shadow spat.

"Did it ever occur to you that he may have been moving to help Draco and I?"

"No. It didn't occur to me to flail around in denial!"

Severus snarled silently, but the oncoming tirade was cut off at the sound of many people
approaching. The Potion Master ran toward the downed Moody and searched his person before
levitating him. "We must go!"

"How does the Order expect to get out of here alive?" Shadow demanded as he levitated his brother
in the same way.

"They're supposed to be in groups. If a member goes down, then the remaining party is to retreat
outside the wards to take the injured to care. Alastor most likely continued on despite all good
sense."

"So what are we going to do?" Draco panted, coming up on their heels.

"We are going to follow procedure. I found a return portkey. Hopefully it will be activated by the
code words I'm familiar with," Severus explained impatiently. He held up a hand to stop them and
checked the corner before allowing them to go past.

They ran on like this for several minutes. Shadow activated the swamp enchantment the twins had
given him. Hopefully that would slow their pursuers down a bit. He became aware of Draco falling
behind. Worried, he looked the blond over and saw that he was cradling his wand hand to his chest.
Hissing, he grabbed his friend's forearm and tugged so he could see the injury. Draco's hand was
swollen with pus leaking out of black crispy skin. Draco met his eyes and now Shadow could see the
pain there, but they couldn't stop. Death Eaters were on their tail and they had two vulnerable people
to protect. Battle would not be in their favor. They had to push on.

"Almost there," Severus encouraged, slowing his pace for the two teens. "I can sense the end of the
wards up ahead."

It didn't come soon enough. Suddenly spells were exploding all around them. Shadow dropped his
brother and cast a powerful shield around him, before turning and facing their enemies. His
distraction cost him and pain scrapped along his nerves. Screaming, he collapsed, fighting as Boy
slowly began rise to the surface. Severus stepped over him, roaring in fury. As his father passed, the
spell disappeared.
Sobbing, wiping sweat and tears from his face, Shadow got back on his feet and faced the five Death Eaters that had come up behind them. The first two were kneeling, giving the three standing shoulder-to-shoulder behind them room to aim. The front two cast blocks and shields that bounced all of Severus's and Draco's spells clear.

Shadow copied their formation, falling back to his knees and focused solely on shielding. He broke out in a sweat in minutes, not only having to concentrate on his father and friend, but also on his brother and the bastard Moody. His father would obviously not appreciate it if something happened to the Order member.

Severus was skilled and vicious, especially when it came to protecting his son, but he was only one man. He was standing against three well-trained Death Eaters. Draco was a help, but the boy was quickly approaching the end of his strength. Fatigue would take him down soon even if the Death Eaters didn't.

The situation looked bleak. Spells were leaking through his son's shields. A deep cut slashed open on his arm, would have taken out his head if he hadn't raised his arm to protect his neck. A quick blood clotting spell prevented him from bleeding out. Draco screamed as he was struck blind, but he didn't fall. He continued flinging spell after spell toward their enemies.

Severus thought furiously. They couldn't last like this. They were going to die if something wasn't done. He grew more and more desperate and finally one of his spells struck home. The man screamed hysterically and began to thrash, trapped in a hallucination that convinced him he was being attacked by poisonous African wasps.

The other two Death Eaters practically growled and doubled their efforts. Severus was slammed backward, the power of the attack was cut in half by Shadow's shields, but still he saw stars as his head hit the side of the cave wall. Draco screamed his defiance and cast the Cruciatus Curse. One of the defenders in the front was struck, allowing a short opening for Severus to inflict some damage. Draco couldn't hold the curse for long. The Death Eater was released and the shield went up again. The spell bombardment increased in fury.

Shadow whimpered, his head bowed, sweat dripping from his curls. He was running out of strength. A fine tremor took up in his arms and shoulders. Black dots danced in his vision, but he refused to let go. His heart beat a rapid pace and coldness was seeping back in his veins. Demon was practically salivating at the prospect of Shadow falling and letting him Out.

Draco took a face full of puke-yellow spell-light and fell. Shadow watched, almost like his friend went down in slow motion. He couldn't move. His shields were already sputtering and about to crumble. Severus yelled something dark and sinister and for a second Shadow felt the pressure on his shields ease as the Death Eaters did all the could to block the Potion Master's attack.

"Don't be dead," he ordered in a croak and crawled over to his friend.

The blond lay cold and clammy. His breath literally frosted the air. Shadow shakily cast warming charms, any that he knew. If Draco's core body temperature dropped too low, he would die. He looked up to see Severus's distraction fall and another assault was coming. He looked back and saw Neville sitting with wide eyes, awake, but still weak. The Gryffindor flung his wand forward and bolstered Shadow's shields, but it wasn't going to be enough. That understanding passed between the two teens, horror and resignation drifting through their eyes like clouds.

"Lumos Maximus!"

Both boys gasped and, when they could see again, discovered Charlie Weasley and Kingsley
Shacklebolt standing at their sides. Shadow dropped his shields, Charlie taking his place. The redhead spared him a glance, merely to ascertain his status, before focusing on the battle. The curly-haired teen grabbed Draco and dragged him over to Neville. They sat huddled together for warmth and safety; Shadow kept his wand out and cast a few spells here and there, but mostly he sat guard as his brother fainted once again.

xXxXxXx

"What were you thinking?" Severus demanded with icy calm.

He stood in his temporary bedroom back at Grimmauld Place. They had returned only thirty minutes ago after almost three hours of fighting free of the caves. Word must of spread about Severus and Draco turning traitor and most of the battle had been focused on them afterwards. Downstairs, the Order members were being treated, the worst cases flooed on to Saint Mungo's or Hogwarts' Infirmary. Virtually no one who was part of the attack had come back unscathed and the gains of the morning were minor.

They had only two Death Eater prisoners, and both of those were lower members. They were being interrogated by McGonagall, but there was no real hope that they would have very important information. The death toll was high. Four Order members had passed on, along with two Aurors borrowed from Fudge. The final tally for reported deaths of Death Eaters was at eleven. Not nearly as high as they had hoped.

Shadow was sitting on his father's bed, exhausted, but he was obviously not allowed to rest yet. Draco was lying unconscious next to him. Severus treated his injuries himself with several potions. Neville had been collected by his grandmother. Shadow had expected some kind of angry reaction, but she looked proud. That made him feel sick to his stomach. Neville finally gained approval, but he had to risk his life to do it.

"I am a grown man. I did not need you to come rescue me," Severus drawled, fury flashing in his black eyes. "Such reckless behavior is frankly astonishing coming from you. Perhaps my understanding of your intelligence is not quite accurate. Either my cover was blown and my life was already forfeit or I was relatively safe among my former colleagues. Your presence would not have assisted me or anyone else in either scenario. For the first, there was nothing that could be done. For the second, you would have blown my cover and endangered my life. Not only that, but you put your closest friend, one whom you call brother, in danger as well as yourself!"

"For the first, even if you were dead, there was still Draco to think of." Shadow glared back. "The Order would never have even conceived of the notion that he may need help. So my presence was necessary. For the second, you would have blown my cover and endangered my life. Not only that, but you put your closest friend, one whom you call brother, in danger as well as yourself!"

"That is not your decision to make!" Severus yelled hotly. "You are not my keeper!"

"No! I'm your son!" Shadow yelled back, horrified to find tears in his eyes. "I've only had a father for a few weeks! I'd kind of like to have one for a bit longer!"

Severus was struck speechless. He stood, stiff and panting, just staring down at the exhausted teen glaring defiantly back at him. "I will not let my life go easily. I understand your fear, but it is not acceptable for you to act so recklessly. Do you understand?"

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Shadow rubbed at his eyes with stiff fingers and didn't answer. The whole night was pretty much a disaster. He hadn't been in control from the moment he found Draco. He had been ill prepared for the battle that resulted. He agreed completely that it was unacceptable that Draco and Neville got so hurt.
Even his father had been wounded, though the man was too secretive to admit it.

"We'll discuss this later," Severus spoke, drawing him out of his thoughts. "As well as your near miss with Demon. For now, rest."

Shadow nodded. He was too exhausted to even stand, let alone walk back to his room, so he moved to lie beside Draco. The bed was big enough for the both of them. Severus said nothing and pulled the covers up around him. Shadow was asleep a second after that. Severus watched him for a moment longer, making sure he was well and truly asleep. Then he cast a monitoring charm on both of them and silently slipped out of the room.

He was surprised they allowed him to put it off this long. As expected, there was someone waiting for him to come out of his room. Kingsley Shacklebolt gave him a neutral look and gestured for Severus to follow him. The Potion Master did so, limping after him with tired dignity. Kingsley slowed his pace and they walked together into one of the smaller sitting rooms.

Minerva and Doge were already waiting there. They both looked grim and exhausted. Kingsley shut the door behind them and Severus's skin tightened with the feel of the strong privacy wards snapping into place.

"Sit down, Severus," Minerva said, not unkindly.

Severus made his way to one of the chairs and sat slowly.

"What happened?" Doge wheezed, his eyes on the dark-haired man.

Severus began to explain the trial, leaving out nothing. His recitation was concise and it only took ten minutes. Minerva was pacing by the end like a caged lion. She was obviously unhappy.

"We knew we couldn't expect much help from the Ministry," Kingsley's deep voice rumbled.

"Yes, but I didn't expect to have to guard ourselves from them, either. They obviously are ill prepared to even acknowledge this fight," Minerva snarled.

"We will have the anklet gone from you," Doge promised, though how he thought to keep such a promise, Severus didn't know. He was secretly shocked at how they were reacting to the Ministry's treatment of him. He assumed they would think the precautions unfortunate but necessary.

"What happened after you were portkeyed away?" Kingsley asked.

Severus took a deep breath and began to report on all he saw and heard. He didn't leave anything out. Not even what happened to Draco or the mental instability of many of the Death Eaters. He explained that in an attempt to protect his son, he pretended loyalty to them, but at the first sign of attack, he abandoned his post, retrieved Draco, found Shadow and Longbottom, and the rest was battle.

"Why are they so unbalanced?" Doge asked, worriedly.

Severus could only stare at the man. Were they not going to berate him for his deception, for pretending even for a moment to be a Death Eater again? He cleared his throat and answered the old man's question. "The Dark Arts are a destructive force. Perhaps they tried some spell or ritual that backfired and affected their minds."

Minerva summoned an elf and ordered it to bring them all drinks. Severus sighed, the warm liquid soothing his dry throat.
"Do you think their insanity will hurt or help our cause?" she asked thoughtfully after a few seconds.

"Perhaps sometimes it will benefit us, but not always," Severus answered regretfully. His long fingers cradled the cup in his hands, the heat beginning to relax him. "They are more ruthless than ever and perhaps more focused on their end goal. Obsession is dangerous."

"And you heard nothing about the Dark Lord or Harry Potter?" Kingsley sat down, disappointment obvious on his bruised face.

"Nothing. They didn't exactly believe my professions of allegiance."

"Well, the two we brought back insists that the Dark Lord is alive if not well. Supposedly your potions were to bring their Lord back to health," Minerva sighed. "I'm going to take this as a sign of encouragement. Surely if the Dark Lord survived the encounter in the grave yard, then Potter must have as well. I'm going to assume the Death Eaters don't have the boy prisoner. Surely they wouldn't be able to stop themselves from boasting about that."

Severus nodded, though inside his heart had skipped a beat. The Dark Lord was alive? He didn't want to believe it, but suddenly attitudes and evasive conversations he overheard made sense. But how was that possible? He saw with his own eyes the destruction of the Dark Lord at Demon's hand! If the Dark Lord was somehow back, Shadow was in grave danger. Hopefully Lucius was merely spreading a false rumor to support his claim of leadership over the others.

"It's late," Minerva spoke, drawing him out of his chaotic thoughts. "We're falling asleep as we sit."
She stood and removed the silencing wards. "I'm glad to have you back, Severus. Be sure to check in with a healer before going to bed. We'll discuss your son's little act of thievery tomorrow. Very brave and reckless of him, wasn't it?"

The last was said with a teasing glint in her eyes. Severus sneered at her and swept by. He headed straight for his room, secretly enjoying hearing her laugh behind him. He had no illusions about his son. There were Gryffindor aspects to him, which had been on full display this morning. However, the more domineering aspect of Shadow's mind was Slytherin. He'd just have to remind Shadow of that. If the Dark Lord was in those caves - even had he been injured or ailing - Shadow's rescue attempt was even more dangerous than either of them had realized.

The thought of the Dark Lord getting a hold of his son was enough to insure he had nightmares.

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"How are you feeling?" Shadow asked. He had woken a moment ago to find his friend sitting up and staring at the wall.

"It doesn't hurt." Draco shrugged.

"What's wrong?" Shadow climbed out of bed and moved to stand in front of the blond.

"I can't ever go back, I don't think," Draco whispered, tilting his head so his hair covered his eyes. It wasn't only Shadow who was picking up Severus's mannerisms.

Shadow smiled faintly, but it was a sad smile. He knew what Draco was talking about. Going home, going back to his father. If Lucius ever got a hold of Draco again, he would be dead or worse. It was final now, and though he knew Draco didn't regret his decision, Shadow could understand the lost feeling. Draco was orphaned now, alone. Unless…

"What about your mother?" he asked gently. "I thought she realized Lucius was mad and left him."
"She did, but they are married. Lucius won't break that bond. She can't help me or see me. Not until Lucius is dead," Draco explained angrily. He stood and was glad that he was still dressed. He wasn't sure the welts were gone completely and didn't want Shadow to see them.

"I'm sorry, Serpentine," Shadow said softly. It was the right thing to say.

Draco turned to him, the tension in his shoulders relaxing. "Yes, well... It's not the end of the world. Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving."

Shadow led the way. He kept up a whispered commentary about the rooms they passed and who was probably in Grimmauld Place, but when they found the kitchen, only Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were there. Draco hung back, his face blank. Shadow stepped forward and Ginny smiled at him.

"Are you hungry? We're just making dinner. It should be ready in an hour," she said.

"Come in, come in. Sit. You can have a snack to hold you over," Mrs. Weasley insisted. She had flour on her nose and Ginny subtly cast a cleaning spell at her.

Draco came into the room and sat stiffly beside Shadow. His eyes were glued to the table, but when Mrs. Weasley floated a cold sandwich in front of him and a glass of milk, he looked up long enough to thank her politely. Ginny was watching him like a hawk and her eyes got huge when she heard Draco's polite words. Shadow lifted an eyebrow at her curiously. She blushed and spun away, returning to helping her mother with dinner.

They ate in silence, just listening to mother and daughter chat and work. Once they were done with their plates and glasses, Shadow spelled them into the sink and set the sponge to scrubbing. Mrs. Weasley spared him a grateful glance before she rushed to a boiling pot. Shadow turned and left them, looking for Draco, who had left as soon as possible. He found him in the floo parlor at a chess board.

"What's up?" he asked worriedly.

"It's just a lot to take in," Draco answered and gestured at the other side. "Care to play a game?"

Shadow took the hint. Draco didn't want to talk about it. So he sat down and moved a pawn. They were only three moves into the game when Ron and Hermione came in. Both Gryffindors froze when they saw Draco.

"Hey." Shadow smiled, pretending to be ignorant of the tension in the room. "Things didn't go quite as planned. Did you guys get in trouble for covering for me?"

"Not yet," Hermione answered. "But I don't think they know we helped. If anyone gets in trouble, it will be the twins, but I don't think they mind."

"Good."

"What the bloody hell is he doing here?" Ron finally exploded.

"Draco was rescued from the caves," Shadow explained. Draco blushed furiously, hating the fact that the statement put him in a position of weakness in front of Ron Weasley.

"Rescued?! He's probably a plant from his father! He's going to spy on us for the Death Eaters!"

"Ron," Hermione tried to calm him, but it was obviously not a full-hearted attempted.
"Draco is not his father. And besides, I'm sure the Order is taking precautions if that is the case. I don't see how it concerns us. What could spying on us accomplish?" Shadow shrugged, but his eyes had gone hard.

Ron was red with fury. "It does concern us! He could capture us as hostages for our parents or something awful like that! He's a slimly little Slytherin and…"

"My father's a Slytherin and I may be as well," Shadow interrupted, glaring. He stood and challenged the redhead with the tilt of his head.

"You don't understand," Hermione pleaded as Ron spluttered. "Malfoy had antagonized us since our First-year at Hogwarts. He believes in Pureblood Supremacy and is very derogatory toward Muggleborns like myself."

"I've come to see things differently, Granger," Draco said, finally joining the argument. He stood next to Shadow, his posture perfect, his hands clasped behind his back to show he had no intent to duel or cause harm. "I was a child repeating what I'd been taught by my father. I've begun to question those ideals. My father's service is neither glamorous nor full of honor."

Hermione's eyes were wide, but Ron looked about ready to murder. "So you just want to switch sides, is that it? You think all you've done, like trying to get Harry killed or all the times you've attacked us, can be forgotten? We know what kind of person you are, Malfoy. That don't change!"

"Don't be an ass!" Shadow yelled just as furiously. "People can change! The Order isn't an exclusionist club, Weasley. It's a war. Anyone who is willing to fight is welcome. Who the hell do you think you are to think you have the ability and the right to judge? You have no idea what happened in those caves! Draco saved my father's and my life at great risk to himself. I don't know what Draco's done to you in the past, but it sounds like school boy rivalries. And that hardly makes anyone evil."

Hermione looked confused and a bit ashamed. Ron merely looked mad. Shadow sneered at them and marched from the room.

Draco followed, his face expressionless. They made their way up to the library in silence, Draco watching his friend's back. He was surprised at the impassioned defense. He knew they were friends, but still this was Weasley and Granger. He was impressed. Plus, Shadow's outburst seemed off the cuff, but it had been carefully phrased so as not to give away the fact that they have known each other longer than just last night.

"You didn't have to do that," Draco murmured, sitting.

"Maybe not," Shadow agreed. He grabbed his book and flipped it open roughly.

"Children's stories?" Draco smirked.

"Shuddup," Shadow glared, but his mouth quirked up into a helpless smile.

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Ron stood by the chessboard and stared down at it with a hot scowl.

Hermione stood next to him, wringing her hands. "Malfoy was quiet most of last year. He didn't really bother us like he normally did, did he?"

"Don't tell me you're thinking of forgiving him." Ron lifted his eyes to her and she flinched slightly
"No… I just think we could observe him for a few days and see. I mean, Shadow said he risked his life to get away. And we've heard the Headmistress talking to the others, Ron. The Death Eaters have gone insane from a failed Dark Arts attempt. Imagine witnessing such a horrible thing. Imagine living with Lucius Malfoy. That's bound to turn anyone to our side, don't you think?"

"No. I don't think. I think Draco Malfoy worships his father and still does. I think he's going to get information and send it to Lucius, the man who had You-Know-Who possess my little sister! I think he's going to get a lot of people hurt and killed!" Ron was bellowing by the end.

Ginny walked into the room to tell them dinner was ready, just as the fire turned green and Mrs. Longbottom and Neville stepped out. Ginny grinned and ran to her boyfriend, putting her arms around his neck in a tight hug. Neville smiled down at her and hugged her back. Augusta sniffed at this, but she left the room without saying a word.

"Neville! I can't believe you went with him and didn't even tell us!" Ginny exclaimed. She leaned back to look into his brown eyes. "That was really brave and reckless of you! You could have been killed!"

"How did you know Shadow was even going?" Hermione questioned.

"I don't know… It was just in his eyes. So when he walked me out, I made him promise to take me with him." Neville blushed with embarrassment. "I couldn't let him go alone. He would have been killed without help."

"What's with Malfoy coming here?" Ron demanded, still stuck on the previous conversation.

Neville blinked at him. "What do you mean? His father was torturing him. Professor Snape and Shadow wouldn't leave him behind. Neither would I, really. It was awful." He paled as he remembered the marks on Draco's back, imagining what they would have looked like fresh. The horror of the battle that followed was even worse and still hovered in his mind. All that pain and battle-joy, the blood and screams… War was not pretty. It was nothing short of a nightmare. The only thing that made it bearable was the fact that they had saved Draco and Professor Snape.

"Tortured?" Hermione gasped.

Neville blinked at them and frowned. "Look. Maybe I shouldn't have told you. Don't say anything, please?"

"We won't," Ginny promised, glaring at her brother. She looked back at Neville with pleading eyes. "Can you tell us anything about what it was like?"

Neville didn't want to actually. He needed some distance from the horrific event, but… He could see the eagerness in her eyes, as well as Ron's, and the curiosity in Hermione's. It disturbed him that they still had the illusions of battle glory. He remembered thinking the same. How wonderful it would be to fight for your beliefs and vanquish the bad guys! To be a hero and have everyone cheer! But real fighting wasn't like that. It was hard and terrifying.

So he spoke in a low voice of what he had seen. Of the horrible sights, the awful sounds, the fear and helplessness, the desperation. Of the sweat and tears, of the wounds, of the moment when he had met Shadow's eyes and they were certain they were about to die, the helpless despair that came with that certainty. War was bloody and madness hung over everyone, even the good guys. It was a desperate bid for life and it wasn't ever certain you would come out the winner.
Hermione was crying by the end. Ginny and Ron were both pale, eyes wide. War wasn't something to take lightly. People died. People suffered. It was ugly. Hopefully they wouldn't be so eager now to jump into a battle.

Mrs. Weasley came into the room and scowled. "What's this? What's the matter, Hermione, Ginny? You four are holding up dinner."

"Nothing, Mum. We were just talking," Ginny whispered and ducked her head.

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley." Hermione wiped at her eyes and hurried toward the kitchen.

Ron went with her silently.

Mrs. Weasley tisked and followed them, expecting her daughter and Neville to follow.

Ginny looked over at Neville. His face was drawn, but his eyes were steady. The depths of Neville had surprised her at first. She saw his pure heart and his unwavering loyalty, but it wasn't until now that she really saw his strength and wisdom. Neville had a quiet power about him that you never really saw until you were still and listened and watched carefully. Ginny saw it in full now and she wanted nothing more than to kiss him. So she did.

Neville responded and held her to his chest almost desperately. Ginny wished she could take away all he had seen - it had obviously disturbed him - but she couldn't. So she'd settle for showing him that he was loved. Neville sank into her warmth, into the comfort she gave him, allowing her to push out the images in his mind. For the first time since the awful battle, he felt his muscles relax.

Chapter End
Getting Things Sorted

A lot of things happened really quickly during the last two weeks of summer break. It all kind of passed like a blur for both the students and Order members staying at Grimmauld Place. Everyone expected it, that the Death Eaters would strike back, but no one could have predicted what happened next.

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Thursday, August 18

Order of the Phoenix: an Order of Anarchy

Minister Fudge held a press conference this morning to report on the tragic events of late Tuesday night and on into Wednesday morning.

"I mistakenly believed Headmistress Minerva McGonagall's hysterical reports of Death Eater activity and granted her Aurors to help in the search for the supposedly kidnapped Snapes. I should have been suspicious when she claimed they were portkeyed out of the Ministry, which we all know is impossible, but I am saddened to admit that I did not suspect the truth in time. In result, two Aurors lost their lives," the Minister said with grave eyes.

He went on to explain that four Aurors assisted Headmistress Minerva McGonagall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in a raid of a suspected Death Eater hideout yesterday. The new Headmistress insisted that her operatives in the Order of the Phoenix knew the situation better and should be in charge instead of trained professionals. Minister Fudge reported to the assembly that the mission was a failure due to poor leadership and armature mistakes. Two of the Aurors, Fredrick Denton and Melissa Sherwin, died. The only positive results of the disastrous operation was the capture of two Death Eaters.

These two criminals allegedly confessed during interrogation that the Death Eaters were acting under the influence of the madman Sirius Black and not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. News that this reporter is unsurprised to learn considering that the renewed Death Eater activity coincides with the mass murderer's escape. Minister Fudge further reassures the public that the rumors saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned are false, propagated by the Order of the Phoenix in a bid for power. The Ministry can no longer support the Order's wild, unfounded allegations, and, in fact, will arrest any active member from this point forth.

"I was reluctant to admit to myself the deviousness of the Order of the Phoenix, especially since it was founded by Albus Dumbledore, but I can no longer ignore the facts. Often the Order’s interference has made the Aurors' jobs difficult and has even, on occasion, allowed suspects to make an escape before they can be brought to justice," Minister Fudge reveals.

Headmistress McGonagall gave her word to disband this illegal, and until now, secret organization. The wizarding public should not fear. The Ministry promises to put the Aurors on full alert and assures us that any acts of terrorism will be harshly and swiftly dealt with. Still, many hands make light work. Minister Fudge asked us to request of the public that all suspicious activity, be that of the Death Eaters or this shady Order of the Phoenix, should be reported immediately by owl and sent to the Magical Law Enforcement Department.
"Working together, we can quickly return peace to our streets," Minister Fudge states confidently.

On top of this, an autobiography written by the infamous Rita Skeeter was published casting doubts on Dumbledore's character and his death. It revealed Dumbledore's friendship to the Dark Lord Grindelwald, implied he had something to do with his sister's death, a sister that may or may not have been abused. It further speculated that the Order of the Phoenix was Dumbledore's bid to absolute power, an organization that like Dumbledore, looked good but in reality was guilty of all kinds of dark deeds.

After these shocking attacks, McGonagall became very busy fighting off the Ministry, trying to secure her position as Headmistress, and keep the school out of the Ministry's hands. It was a close thing and she had to make many concessions. She renounced the Order and promised to disband it (a lie of course, but they would have to be much more careful now). She kept the Ministry from arresting them all right then and there by claiming she had no idea Dumbledore was as grey as it was now revealed he was.

In truth, most of the things in the autobiography were exaggerated, but some were not. Dumbledore had made missteps, there was no denying that now, but he wasn't the evil man the Ministry and vultures like Rita Skeeter were trying to make him, either. The Order was aware of the cruel and dark things Dumbledore had done in the name of the greater good. It was in his Pensieve, which had passed to Minerva. She had shared it with all the original members of the Order. They were guilty themselves for following Dumbledore so blindly. That was part of the reason everyone in the Order was so determined to do right this time.

Everyone in the Order had reacted dramatically when hearing the full prophecy - also left to Minerva and which she also shared. Some were hopeful, some sad for the orphan who already suffered so much. Some were utterly despairing, thinking the boy already dead.

Due to the high suspicion the article and Fudge's press conference aimed at McGonagall, the Order was forced to reconsidered its leader; Minerva's movements were going to be severely limited now. It was chaos for a while, but in the end it was decided a Triad formation of leaders was the best way to go.

Having three leaders to double check the others would hopefully prevent corruption like Dumbledore’s, and three leaders should insure at least one person would always be available to make decisions. Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Auror, and Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, were elected as two of the three. The third to complete the Triad was surprisingly Bill Weasley, Curse Breaker, and only he would be devoted to the Order full-time.

Since so much was changing, it was decided that they would go all the way. The Order Oaths would also be renewed and reworked. The first vow was: I will serve this order faithfully in its purpose to stop the Dark Lord and his forces. The second vow was: I will do everything in my power, including sacrifice my life, to protect Harry Potter. Nothing less and nothing more. Everyone in the Order agreed and renewed their vows and swore loyalty to the new Triad.

Draco was eventually inducted as a member - the only one out of all the teenagers. The rest were deemed too young. An exception was made for him because he was, for all intents and purposes, emancipated. Everyone would be needed, especially since the Ministry was now a cat's-paw for the Death Eaters, and he had a unique insight into the enemy’s mind.

And if Death Eaters, the Ministry, and Order politics weren't enough, Shadow had quite a few personal problems as well. Demon was the hot topic of conversation in his therapy sessions over the
last two weeks. However, Severus's attempts to discuss it was met with a complete lack of response from the teen.

"You are obviously more in tune to Demon than you are admitting," Severus snarled after one of Shadow's more exasperating silences. "Merging is closer than you think and you need to be careful."

When Shadow still didn't respond or explain what he was thinking about the dangerous alter, Severus stalked over aggressively. "You were trapped in a loop with him, if you have forgotten," he said with crisp anger, crossing his arms and glaring down at his son, who still sat with an air of unconcern. "And you've been having dream-memories. This is all pointing to a very obvious conclusion."

"Sharing anger is not the same as accepting, or even understanding, all Demon is," Shadow finally snapped.

"Oh, do enlighten me since you know so much," Severus drawled scornfully.

"He is in my head." The teen sat in the high-back chair, glaring up at his father. His hands gripped the armrests so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"Explain it to me, then."

"Demon is not only anger, he is hate and bloodlust," Shadow finally revealed. His eyes flashed with not only anger at being pushed but a deep disquiet. "I could never accept either one of those without losing myself. Trust me. I will not merge with Demon."

Severus relaxed marginally. "I feel it is best if you do not. At least, anytime soon. But if it is any consolation, I am… uncertain if Demon's hate would overwhelm you completely. Like Kit, his urges may be tempered by the merge."

"Only leaving me murderous when I get very angry," Shadow sneered. He slashed his hand out violently as if to cut off the conversation. "No. Just no… I'm tired of talking about it. He will never be more than he is. A small, separate part of who I am. If you want to talk about Demon, talk about containment. I won't talk about anything else. Especially not merging."

Severus let the matter lie and during their other sessions moved on to anger management techniques: More breathing exercises, some Occlumency tricks, and he even taught Shadow some spells that were very violent and were fueled by anger, leaving the caster temporarily empty of that emotion if they were used repeatedly.

Other tensions in Grimmauld Place included the feud between Ron and Draco. It didn't help that Draco was made an Order member when Ron had been denied, especially since the redhead was desperate to be of help finding Harry. And then the unexpected Prefect badge came, but again Draco stole some of his thunder. The celebratory party was for three - Hermione included - and Mrs. Weasley practically doted on the Slytherin, deeply distressed by his orphaned status and inclusion in the dangerous Order.

Life would have been unbearable for Shadow if it weren't for the twins. Their pranks and their easy acceptance of Draco (it amused them to shock everyone by accepting the blond Slytherin) lightened the oppressive atmosphere of the place. Ginny and Hermione avoided Draco most of the time. Neville visited twice more when his grandmother came to report in, but he had to pretend to be neutral as well, since he wasn't supposed to like Draco very much or know Shadow very well. Overall, the teens were all very glad when September first rolled around and they were sent back to Hogwarts.
Even so, the only thing Shadow truly wished he could change was the fact that the Headmistress couldn't get the Ministry to agree to remove the monitoring device on Severus. The anklet would have to remain. On the plus side, it would only activate if Severus were to use Dark magic, but if that were to happen, it would portkey him immediately into a Ministry interrogation cell. One in which he likely wouldn't leave alive.

Neither Shadow nor Severus were very comfortable with this. After all, the Ministry could activate it whenever they wanted and kidnap him. Bill and a few other Order members were working on a way of disabling the device without letting the Ministry know. Shadow hoped they came up with something soon.

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Draco shifted in his sleep, his face scrunched in annoyance until it registered that the sound waking him were whimpers from the teen laying next to him. He sat bolt upright with a gasp. He turned to the side to see Shadow, a normally restless sleeper, now trembling and whimpering, sweat coating his face and neck, his curls in even more disarray.

"Hey," Draco called gently. He knew from past experience that touching his friend in the middle of a nightmare was not a good idea. "Hey, wake up. It's just a dream."

Two strange eyes flashed open and looked utterly distraught by whatever they had been witnessing. Shadow jerked away and fell with a heavy thunk to the cold wood floor. Draco hurried to look over the side and was surprised to see Shadow crying, his shaking hands hiding his face.

"Hey," Draco said again, his heart twisting in pain at seeing him so upset. This was one of the really bad ones. "It's all right now."

Shadow shook his head violently and scrambled to his feet. Without a word of explanation, he ran from the room and into the bathroom down the hall. Draco sighed, leaning tiredly in the doorway.

The door to the next room opened and Severus stepped into the hall, wrapped in a black sleeping robe. His dark eyes immediately pinned Draco in place and demanded answers. Draco had no doubt that should his professor deem him the cause of Shadow's distress, he would be taken care of.

"A nightmare," Draco whispered, glaring. He didn't appreciate the man even thinking he would hurt Shadow.

"What about?" Severus asked with a dark frown.

"He didn't say. He never does."

"Return to bed," the man ordered and stepped fully into the hall, shutting his door behind him.

Draco hesitated but relented. Sighing, the blond crawled back into the bed he and Shadow had been sharing. There wasn't enough rooms to give Draco one of his own. He was just lucky Shadow didn't mind. The twins had also offered, but three to a bed was a bit much. Plus Draco had a suspicion that he wouldn't come out of their room whole by morning. The Weasley twins were utterly insane.

Of course, he was only thinking about them now to stop worrying about Shadow. He sighed and forced his to eyes close in an overly-optimistic bid for more sleep. He wished there was something he could do. It was no wonder really why Shadow would have bad dreams considering all he's been through, but he deserved some peace of mind, damn it! This was the fifth nightmare in two weeks! It was utterly maddening to feel protective over someone and not be able to do anything to help them.
Shadow fought to even his breathing, bracing himself over the bathroom sink. Why? Why wouldn't these dreams stop? He was either stalking Demon's stone door or dreaming of torture at Lockhart's hands. Tonight it had been a new breed of nightmare, a blending of the two.

First he was walking down the stone corridor, wishing he were brave enough to touch Demon's door, lust and excitement consuming him at the idea of all the destruction Demon was capable of… Then he was in a bed, the sheets bunched around him, twisting under his grasping hands, a mouth working him, nails tantalizing the sensitive skin on his inner thighs, and the moans… Oh, the moans that almost pushed him over the edge, the vibrations cutting straight through him…

Shadow gasped and threw the water on, desperately splashing his face. A deep ache had settled in his groin and it infuriated him! He was above degrading urges such as these. He knew better, damn it! Sex was disgusting! He had to stop this. He had to let it go. He was sick. Utterly and completely mentally ill to feel so good under those evil dream-hands.

"Shadow?"

Horrified, his eyes flashed to the mirror and met the black-eyed gaze of his father.

Severus stepped fully into the room and cast a strong privacy ward. All without dropping the panicking teen's gaze. "You are having nightmares?"

Shadow didn't know what to do. On the one hand, he felt utterly desperate and this man was the only one who had ever helped him or offered him comfort. He wanted to tell him everything. On the other hand, he was humiliated and vulnerable, making him want to curl up and hide. He was too ashamed to tell his father what was inside his head.

"Was it Demon again?" Severus asked, deeply worried. He hadn't seen Shadow like this in a very long time. There was a hint of Boy in the depths of his eyes and Rose. It still surprised him, even now, to be faced with such fragility when Shadow was usually so capable and resilient; Silas and Gabriel were strong in him.

Empathy on high due to his distress, Shadow was filled with his father's gentle understanding and concern. Tears burned his eyes and he clenched them closed, not needing to see his father to know he was there. He took a shaky breath and folded his hands tightly before him - unconsciously using one of Rose's gestures - and forced the words past his trembling lips. He couldn't go on like this. He needed help.

"It's… him… Lockhart…” he whispered.

Severus had expected this to happen eventually. Shadow had been avoiding confronting the deeper issues of his molestation for a while. Leaning against the sink, he picked up a cloth and got it wet. Carefully stilling his own emotions, he wiped at his son's unnoticed tears.

"What do you see in these dreams?"

"It's like… I'm reliving it as Kit… but I'm not… Everything's a little different. For example, Lockhart never… He never had me in a b-bed. But in tonight's dream I was."

"Was he doing things he had done before or is something new happening?"

"He was… He was…” He couldn't say it, so he settled by answering, "Yes. It was something he's done to me. Nothing new.” Shadow shook his head hard, frustrated and afraid, hating both. He
staggered back and sat at the edge of the tub. He still kept his eyes tightly shut. He couldn't bear to see his father even though he knew there wouldn't be disappointment or disgust in his eyes.

"What kind of things?" Severus asked carefully. It was vital that his voice was completely neutral. Otherwise Shadow would either shut down or explode. Still, the carefully voiced question made his son tremble and hug himself.

"He was... sucking..." It barely came out, Shadow spoke so softly.

"In the dream..." Severus was a bit at a loss. He pressed his fist into his thigh forcefully to steady himself. It was taking all of his self-control to remain calm and receptive, instead of reacting to Shadow's distress. "You feel like Kit?"

"Yes. It feels... g-g-good. It's only after I wake up... It's only then that I get... upset."

"And you hate yourself for that?" Severus guessed correctly, seeing the angry flush that had risen in his son's face.

"Of course!" Shadow exploded, eyes flashing open. He was on his feet now and very dangerously angry. "What the fuck do you think? I'm thrilled to wake up wet and sticky after dreaming of that horrible, wretched man? Feeling those awful things again?"

"Those feelings aren't awful," Severus admonished gently. "They're natural. With the right person, these types of feelings will make you feel joy."

Shadow's anger disappeared as quickly as it had come as the teen shut down. He backed away, his eyes shuttered.

"I see. Things are worse than I thought."

Shadow frowned sullenly and crossed his arms.

"Sex is abhorrent to you. It's not just Lockhart," Severus spoke slowly, clearly. He had to press home his point now or there would be no getting through to his very stubborn son. "In fact, I bet you don't even see Lockhart in these dreams. You merely relate the sensation to him."

"No. It's him," Shadow snapped, defensive. He was regretting talking now. He wanted to go back to bed or better yet go to the library, anything but talk about this further. Unfortunately, his father was blocking the door. "I see blond hair. And sometimes there's a deep voice. Of course it's him! Who else would it be?"

Severus froze. Blond hair... The suspicions that came to him when he saw Draco and Shadow together came blazing back in his mind. It made him uneasy. Not over the fact that Shadow might be gay, but it upset him to contemplate the difficult struggle this would mean for his son. Hopefully, if the gods were kind at all, Severus was reading things wrong. In any case, that was in the future and he had to deal with the present.

"And if it weren't him, would you still feel so distressed over these dreams? Say... if it were the young lady you took to the ball last year?"

"Parvati?" Shadow frowned. He shivered, a cold sweat breaking out across his lip and brow.

"Can you think of anyone with whom you could accept these feelings?"

Shadow really couldn't. He felt no desire whatsoever to feel like... that... with anyone. It was
unnecessary and disgusting. Why should he? He told shook his head, even knowing his father would consider this the wrong answer.

"But you do desire it, obviously, since you are dreaming of such experiences. You said yourself that you only feel distressed about it once you awaken. You just don't want to acknowledge your need because those feelings are linked to trauma in your mind," Severus pressed ruthlessly forward. "You are a healthy teenage boy, Shadow. Sex is hardwired into your biology. It is normal and…"

Shadow flung himself at the toilet and heaved. He was crying again. Warm arms wrapped around him and rubbed at his back. He knew it was just Severus and a part of him really wanted to be comforted, but despite this he flinched from the touch and practically hissed. His father retreated, giving him space to be mortified and wretched alone.

"Your reaction is quite serious," Severus murmured. "But we will get you through this. We've been through worse."

"It doesn't feel like it," Shadow muttered, looking up at his father bleakly.

Severus brushed curls away from his face so he could look into his son's eyes. This time his touch was tolerated. "And yet we have overcome worse. The first step to curing this is quite easy. I want you to think about - seriously think about - relationships. Not physical intimacy. Relationships alone. Mothers and Fathers. Boyfriends and girlfriends. Supportive partners. Just think of the positive aspects those kinds of relationships have on a person's life. For an hour every day, you will find the time to do this."

"Yes, sir," Shadow sighed, already hating the task, but he willing to do anything to stop the dreams.

"Very good. Enough for now. We have a busy day tomorrow. I'll get you some potion and you will return to bed."

"Thank you." As uncomfortable as he was, as embarrassed and miserable, Shadow still felt grateful to have this man in his life.

"You are welcome." Severus smiled and brushed his son's thin shoulder reassuringly.

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Grimmauld Place was a madhouse. That's all Draco and Shadow could think as they stood in the entrance parlor and waited for everyone else to be ready to head to King's Cross Station.

The cracks of Apparation filled the air as the twins went up and down the stairs trying to hurry everyone. In front of them, coming from the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley was frantically putting together lunches for the train and yelling at the twins for Apparating. To the right, Padfoot was barking up at Shacklebolt who was angrily telling him that it was too dangerous for him to come while Dedalus Diggle complained to the Auror that they couldn't leave if Podmore didn't show up to take his position in the guard.

The boys looked left as two trunks came whipping down the stairs. Ginny who was hovering her trunk and only halfway down got slammed flat. The flying trunks came to a rest at Draco's feet and they could only watch in shock as Ginny tumbled painfully down the staircase. Mrs. Weasley came running from the kitchen, utterly furious.

"YOU COULD HAVE DONE HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS! STOP USING MAGIC FOR EVERY LITTLE THING OR I'LL BREAK YOUR WANDS MYSELF!"
The curtains silencing Mrs. Black’s portrait flung open at the redheaded woman's bellow and added her own voice to the mix. "FILTHY HALF-BREEDS, BESMIRCHING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS!"

Severus came down the stairs and swished his wand. The curtains slammed shut and it was just Mrs. Weasley screaming again at the two remorseful twins who stood before her. Ginny was being cared for by Shacklebolt and Tonks, who said she got plenty of practice fixing scrapes with as clumsy as she was.

"I long for home," Severus murmured when he came up to the two teens.

"Yeah. I know what you mean," Shadow answered faintly. He had never seen such a circus in his life. Draco was silent, content to just sneer.

"WILL YOU TWO GET DOWN HERE, PLEASE?!" Mrs. Weasley bellowed up the stairs, done with the twins.

"MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!" the paining screamed as she was once again awoken.

This time it was Sirius who transformed back to his human self and slammed the curtains closed with a snarl on his human lips. Hermione came running downstairs, flushed and frazzled, books almost overflowing from her arms. Ron was running after her, dragging both their trunks, his shoes untied. Shadow wanted to look away, but it was like a car crash: horrifyingly mesmerizing.

Ron went tumbling just like his sister. Hermione dropped her books and spelled Ron upright again. The trunks couldn't be saved and went crashing down, popping open at the bottom and spilling clothes and school supplies everywhere. Hermione let out a screech of dismay and scrambled to gather her things.

"OH FOR MERLIN'S SAKE!" Mrs. Weasley screamed, almost tearing her hair out.

"I'll help!" Tonks cried and swished her wand at the mess. "Pack!"

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After the craziness of leaving, it was nice to find a quiet carriage. The three Prefects of their group weren't with them, doing their duties and getting inducted by the Head Boy and Girl. The twins were causing havoc with their friends whom they haven't seen all summer. That left just Shadow, Neville, and Ginny. They found a compartment practically empty with one small girl with long blonde hair sitting alone and reading the Quibbler upside-down.

"This is Loony Lovegood," Ginny introduced with a happy giggle.

"Ginny!" Neville scolded, going red in the face.

"She doesn't mind," Ginny assured him and sat next to the girl, smiling at her. "She's a Fourth-year like me and you, Shadow. She's in Ravenclaw."

The boys took their seats and the girl looked over at them with wide blue-eyes.

"I know you, don't I?" Luna asked, staring unblinking at Shadow.

Shadow smiled at the strange girl. "I'm Shadow Snape, Professor Snape's son. I'm new to Hogwarts."
"Shadow… That's a nice name. A good name to hide in; shadows can be very deep." Luna smiled sweetly and ducked behind her magazine again.

Shadow shared a startled glance with Neville. Ginny, clueless, just laughed. The redhead witch cheerfully started a conversation with her boyfriend. Within minutes, Neville moved to sit next to her and they clasped hands. Ginny's eyes sparkled and Neville was flushed with happiness.

Opening his empathy a crack, Shadow observed them. It was sweet and bright. It was a playful love, not yet the devotion that longtime lovers develop, but it was a step above infatuation. It didn't disgust him. He recognized that it granted Neville great happiness and that made him appreciate it, but he still didn't desperately want it for himself. It was nice for Neville. That was all.

"They were bit by with woozells," Luna spoke up, her voice soft enough that it didn't catch the other two's attention.

Shadow looked at her. She was staring at the couple, her magazine in her lap. His empathy showed him a surprisingly neutral surface. Of all the many people he had sensed, only Severus ever felt like that. Luna looked over at him, as if sensing his new awareness of her. Shadow gave her a genuine smile. He shut his empathy completely and leaned his head on the window.

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Draco, Shadow, and Neville stood staring at the beasts that pulled the carriages. They had always thought them to be charmed to pull themselves, but then why have the hitches then? It was a puzzle, but not many of the students ever thought much about it. Until now.

The beasts were like dragon-horses. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible, but they were alive. Very much so. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes were white and staring. Leathern wings sprouted from their backs. Their teeth were large and blunt, their hooves sharp.

"What's the matter?" Ron asked. He had seen them stop and wandered over. Hermione was at his side.

"They are… monstrous," Neville gasped, his eyes huge in his face.

"Beautiful in a terrible way," Draco opinioned.

"What?" Ron looked around. He even came to stand at Shadow's shoulder to make sure he was looking in the same spot. "There's nothing there. Did you eat something the twins gave you?"

"Come on. The carriages are leaving!" Hermione hurried them.

"I thought only I could see them," Luna spoke and they all jumped. No one had heard her approach. She stared at the horse-like creatures and spoke with a dreamy voice. "They've always pulled the carriages. Since first year, I could see them doing so."

"What are they?" Shadow asked.

"Thestrals."

"Come on."

Draco meandered back over toward the Slytherins. Ginny took Neville's arm, demanding that he describe what he could see. Neville answered her in a low voice and she hung on every word. They
went toward their own carriage, so Shadow found himself alone in a carriage with his old best-friends.

"You sure you're okay, mate?" Ron asked, bemused.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Shadow shook his head and looked out the window. It was almost upsetting the way a boy who grew up with magic all his life was so quick to dismiss the idea that Shadow could see something real that he couldn't. Instead, he just thought Shadow was out of his mind on something the twins gave him.

"You shouldn't listen to Loony Lovegood," Hermione advised. "She's not exactly all here."

"She's aware of more than you give her credit for," Shadow answered stiffly.

There was an awkward silence.

"Are you nervous?" Ron asked, fidgeting with his sleeve.

"Not really." Shadow shrugged. "I suspect I know where I'm going. And even if I don't get into my father's House, it doesn't really matter to me. I'm not taking many classes with whichever House I'm in anyway."

"That's right," Hermione exclaimed, excited. "Oh, I so envy you. I wish I could take advanced classes. I was just so afraid I'd miss something if I just skipped ahead."

Ron rolled his eyes.

Shadow gave the redhead a curious look. "If I have a class with you two, will we still be okay, even if I'm in Slytherin?"

"Yes, of course," Hermione answered immediately.

Ron hesitated, but he eventually answered the same.

Shadow's smile got bigger, a plan already forming in his head.

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Ron scowled as he listened to the Sorting Hat's message. Uniting with Slytherins, that would be a disaster. They were all going to be Death Eaters and would stab them in the back as soon as they could. They were slimy, evil snakes! What was everyone thinking? I mean, sure, he said Shadow was okay, but Shadow wasn't a real Slytherin, even if he did get Sorted there. He hadn't been here since he was eleven like all the rest. Plus Snape would keep him from going dark.

Hermione was unaware of her friend's somewhat illogical mental arguments. She was too busy being happily shocked. Her boyfriend, the person she had been writing and missing for months, was sitting at the staff table scowling like he normally did in public. His face softened just that little bit to let her know he was happy to see her, too. She grinned down at her plate and nervously straightened her frizzy hair.

Neville only felt relief at the thought of the school uniting. He agreed with the Hat completely. They were stronger together. Ginny could see her boyfriend's thoughts on his face and she frowned. She didn't really want to work with Slytherins, but she wasn't completely repulsed by the idea. However, the animosity was deep and ran both ways. It would take something serious to bridge that gap.
Shadow was pleased. He had already thought that the feud between Gryffindor and Slytherin, though sometimes entertaining, was mostly a hindrance. Out from under the watchful eyes aimed at him and the expectations thrust at him for being Harry Potter, he was free to maneuver in a way he never had been before. It was exhilarating!

_Hogwarts won't know what hit it_, he thought with an eager smirk.

Since McGonagall was Headmistress now, she sat at the head table and let her newly elected Deputy Headmistress do the Sorting.

Septima Vector stood and went to stand by the stool, lifting the heavy scroll with the list of new First-years. She was an older woman between the age of fifty and sixty. She'd been teaching Arithmancy at Hogwarts for thirty-one years. You could tell that when she was young, she had been beautiful. She was slender and tall, had intelligent hazel eyes, and chocolate brown hair that was braided down half the length of her back. A handful of white streaks ran through it attractively. Her face was angular and usually animated, though it was neutral now.

"Snape, Shadow!" Professor Vector finally called.

The school blinked and then burst into movement. Excitement and shock had students standing to watch as Shadow came away from the wall where most hadn't really noticed him. He walked smoothly forward and took a seat on the stool. The Hat came down on his head while everyone stared at their most feared professor as if they had never seen him before.

_Well, well, this is a surprise._

_Hello, Hat._

_I haven't had to confront Occlumency shields in a long time. Take them down, so I can do my job._

Shadow frowned. _Just put me in Slytherin._ He didn't want to take down his shields. He didn't feel safe having even a Hat learning his secrets.

_That's not how it works, I'm afraid_, the Hat seemed to chuckle. Its voice was old, making Shadow think of ancient books and dusty pages. _Don't make me go through them. It will hurt and I don't want to cause a scene._

_I vouch for him_, a new voice interrupted.

_Salazar!_ Shadow scowled, recognizing the voice.

_He belongs with me. I've seen his mind. Sort him in my House_, Salazar's phantom ordered.

_Very well_, the Hat grumbled.

_You're welcome_, Salazar said toward Shadow.

Shadow harrumphed and crossed his arms. That ghost was always trying to examine his fractured mind. He wasn't a specimen, for god's sake! If Salazar thought Shadow would be his guinea pig now, he had another thing coming to him.

_And I'll foster him_, Rowena added her voice. _So there is no need to attack the boy's mind, Hat._
Fine, fine! The boy's secrets are his own! It's not like I care. I just Sort people!

"Slytherin! Fostered by Ravenclaw!" the Hat finally bellowed into the expectant silence.

Shadow groaned and took off the Hat, glaring at it. Nothing can be normal for me, can it? he thought bitterly. He looked up at Headmistress McGonagall and asked with quiet dread, "What does that mean, ma'am?"

"I should have warned you sooner," McGonagall reassured him. "Because your father is the Head of your House, you need another House to act as your Head, since your father is obviously biased. So any House problems, academic concerns, and disciplinary matters will be taken to Professor Flitwick, since he has been chosen as your foster Head of House."

“Oh.” Shadow smiled, relieved. It wasn't so strange. Basically he was in Slytherin, but with Flitwick instead of Snape as his Head. He didn't think he would meet with or need Professor Flitwick, but if he did, he trusted and liked the man, or dwarf, whatever. His sister, Madigan, had saved Neville's life, after all. So he was happy with the choice. "Thank you."

"You are welcome.” She smiled down at him and shooed him off toward his new House table.

Shadow turned and found Draco. He went and sat next to him. Usually the blond was quite popular, Prince of his House, but since his father now had it out for him and that must have trickled down to the Slytherins with Death Eater family members and parents, he was now ostracized. There were two spaces open on either side of him.

He would have made the stupid Hat put him in Slytherin, no matter what it would have said, for this reason alone. Draco needed someone to help watch his back. Severus couldn't do it all the time, and, in fact, could make it worse by being too protective. Shadow, he could protect without drawing more heat on his son, especially since Shadow was posing as younger than he really was, but Draco wasn't his child and help from that quarter would make him appear weak. Not a position Draco could afford to hold, really.

Shadow ran his eyes over the Slytherins surrounding them. Their expressions were mostly guarded, but using a touch of empathy, he could sense the tension, animosity, and curiosity that their blank faces hid. He also could tell the moment they really saw his eyes. Their emotions would flare with fear and slight aversion. He couldn't help the small sigh that escaped him.

"I'd like to request that all of you, from all Houses, help Shadow adjust to being at Hogwarts," McGonagall spoke, standing and looking out over the students. "He is starting as a Forth-year, but will have classes with many of you, even in different years. Due to his home schooling, he is advanced in many of his subjects and his class schedule will be mixed.

"I would also like to introduce two new teachers and one returning professor. Professor Lupin has graciously agreed to come back and teach your history classes. He is also the new Gryffindor Head of House." There was cheering at this, especially from the Gryffindor table, and she smiled down at them fondly. "You should also know this young man, though this is his first year teaching. Professor Viktor Krum will teach Transfiguration for first through fifth years. I will remain the professor for the upperclassmen."

Excited chatter broke out at this. Everyone quickly asked their neighbors what could have happened to have the star Quidditch player quit and come here of all places to teach. Hermione blushed, rightly guessing she was part of the reason Viktor had come. Although she knew through her letters that it also had to do with his parents anger toward him for losing the Triwizard Tournament.
"And, finally, Professor Dolores Umbridge will be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Now, there are further announcements, but we shall have them after..."

When her name had been called, Umbridge had stood, but she had not yet sat down and was making a soft coughing noise that was getting louder. McGonagall stared at her, face blank, but those who knew the Headmistress well, like her former Gryffindors, could tell she was angry by the thinness of her lips.

"Yes, Dolores?"

The woman, short and round, with the face of a toad, curly light brown hair, and a deceptively sweet smiling mouth, came around the table to stand at the front, ensuring everyone was looking at her. She wore a pink cardigan over her robes and folded her hands, which had a few delicate rings on them. Shadow glared, he hadn't seen her among the other teachers, he was so caught up in his own thoughts and watching the students, but he remembered her from the hearing and wasn't pleased to have her here at all.

"Thank you, Headmistress, for your kind words." She smiled at the students, her back to McGonagall whom she supposedly addressed. "It is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say! And to see such happy little faces looking back at me! I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!"

The woman was crazy. Teachers weren't usually friends, and they weren't five years old. Most of the students were highly offended by her cooing tone. There were mutters, mostly annoyed going through the crowd, but Umbridge didn't stop while she was only slightly in the negative in their collective esteem. No, she dug herself deeper with a long and drawn out speech that basically promised this year would be miserable with her breathing down everyone's - including the Headmistress's - back.

"Thank you, Dolores," McGonagall said evenly, but her voice was clipped. "Now we've waited long enough. Let dinner begin."

Loud talk broke out over at the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, each discussing Umbridge mostly, but Shadow's name came up a lot, as well. There were speculations that he was so advanced because Snape would torture him if he weren't above average. Others said he must be ill or something for not being around before. Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Ginny were forced to ignore these false remarks and pretend ignorance. Besides, they were more interested in the awful things Umbridge said.

At the Slytherin table, all was very quiet. Shadow slid a glance at Draco. It would be expected for him to look nervous or supplicating, wishing protection from the hostile watchers. Instead, his eyes sparkled and he smirked. Draco smirked back and with exaggerated unconcern offered him potatoes. The Slytherins stared harder.

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Draco and Shadow followed silently after the other Slytherins. Severus strode along behind them, watching his little group of snakes. It didn't bode well that Draco and Shadow were already being shunned. Not good at all.

All sixty-two students, from First-year to Seventh, gathered in the common room around the luxurious leather and suede couches, emerald green loveseats, and mahogany chairs. Others had to stand along the walls; the dungeon stone covered by paintings of landscapes significant for their history. There were no portraits. The paranoid and suspicious children of this House wouldn't feel comfortable if there had been.
Draco felt his muscles relax, even knowing the trouble he faced. This was home, as he once told Shadow in a letter. He had missed it. Shadow looked around curiously. He and Draco stood next to the fireplace. A great white marble creation almost as tall as he was.

Severus stood, staring at all of them. His hands were clasped behind his back, lank hair framing his formidable features, dark eyes holding deadly intent. "Outside this school," he began, voice dark and soft, compelling and dangerous, "things are rapidly occurring in certain political circles. We are all Slytherins here. It would be foolish to ignore the situation. Some of you, I am well aware, are being compelled by family or personal beliefs, perhaps both, to follow the Dark Lord. I know the position you are in. I once faced the same.

"I caution you not to follow blindly. You are not Hufflepuffs. The Dark Lord's aims have been twisted by insanity. There is a cost, a very steep cost, to avoid death, to be brought back when your life has been taken, to fashion a whole new body when your own has been blasted away, and the Dark Lord has suffered in payment.

"If you do not trust my word, consider this. I was once loyal, a part of his most trusted inner circle, and as many of you know, I have been driven to abandon my position. My only motivation was self-preservation. I have not grown soft or weak. I had an intimate view of the returned Dark Lord and what I saw convinced me of the danger of remaining affiliated with him.

"Those of you with family or friends wearing the Dark Mark and still faithfully serving will know of what I speak. They have changed with the Dark Lord's return. Have abandoned slow and reasoned action for a fevered and desperate rebellion. As Slytherins, it is not in our nature to deny reality or the evidence before us. The Dark Lord is not what he once was, still fearsome and powerful, but vastly unstable and a threat to his followers and his enemies alike. I swear to you that not even perfect obedience and perfect loyalty will protect you from his tortures."

Throughout this long speech, no one moved. No one hardly dared to breathe. The younger students who had yet to learn to completely mask their features looked horrified. The older students all wore expressionless masks, but that wouldn't work against Shadow. He opened his empathy and was struck by powerful determination, fear, superiority, hate, and hope. There was also disappointment.

All these children and teens looked up to Severus, depended on him, and it was a bitter disappointment to some that he had let them down when he never had before. Shadow frowned faintly. He wished he could tell who was feeling what, but there were too many in this crowd to allow him to pinpoint.

"There is more than one option before us now. More than two sides in a war. To be here in this House tells me that you all have the ability to uncover these many potential paths and to walk the one that will benefit you and your families most. I'd like you to consider that the Dark Lord is unstable and is a threat to his own purpose and to his followers. Those who have already become ensnared will need a place of safety to take refuge in when the Dark Lord falls for good.

"To provide any such safety, you will need to be strong and hold a position of power and trust in the community. That position is not going to be granted by crawling to the Dark Lord in fear and suffering under his insane rule. Only cowards act in fear, and only a Lord intent on having slaves will rule through fear instead of respect and a common goal.

"Think on all of this. Talk to each other. Talk to me. I have a Pensieve and I will show any who are curious what it is like to serve the new Dark Lord. However, I will not tolerate sabotage or attacks on your fellow Housemates because of a difference of opinion. Not even about something as important as this.
"For those of you new to this House, Slytherins are universally distrusted at Hogwarts. Outside of this common room, you will be singled out for pranks, unfair treatment, and verbal attacks. Even the teachers will sometimes show evidence of prejudice. Outside these walls, we cannot afford to show weakness. Slytherins stick together, no matter the differences you have.

"When you graduate, you will be forced to work with people you don't necessarily like or enjoy. Think of this as practice. Any injury or insult to your fellow Housemates, even if they are your enemy, is a slur and insult to you personally. Remember, this is a good time to make allies and future connections. The most ambitious and determined witches and wizards are standing next to you, so protect them as you would future assets."

Severus stood staring at all of them, meeting their eyes. His face hardened with determination and anger as he finished, making several of his students swallow hard. "I want to make one thing painfully clear. Anyone who dares to attack another Slytherin or who dishonors this House will have an enemy in me. Be very, very sure you are prepared before you take that step. Do you really want to be unsafe where you sleep? Where you eat? Being in this House and living with your Housemates can be a great opportunity, but it can also be your downfall because there is no worse enemy to have than a Slytherin enemy. Choose wisely, my little snakes.

"Now. Prefects, please step forward," he addressed the older crowd and then returned his attention to the younger. "If you have questions or problems that you feel are too insignificant to be brought to me, come to these students. The fifth year prefects are Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. Sixth year prefects are Cassandra Pucey and Terence Higgs. Seventh year prefects are Julian Montague and Adrian Pucey."

Pansy flipped her long black hair over her shoulder and sniffed, her nose haughtily in the air. Draco stood beside her, his hands casually in his pockets. He looked over the younger students with hooded eyes. Cassandra's long curly hair was pulled into a pony tail. She had her arms crossed and frowned severely. Whether at the younger kids or at Severus's speech, no one knew. Terence had brown hair and blocky features. He smiled but it wasn't exactly a kind smile. Julian sneered, arrogance practically spilling from every pore on his body. Last, Adrian, Cassandra's older brother, stared at the back wall, face perfectly blank.

Severus gestured and the prefects melted back into the crowd. "Tomorrow is your first day of classes. Be watchful and make your House proud. Think carefully before you act. You are Slytherins now and your choices reflect on all of us. Mr. Pucey, please show the First-years to their dormitory."

After a moment of silence, Adrian stepped forward and said, "Come along."

The First-years, consisting of three girls and four boys, scrambled after him. The rest of the students began to disperse, as well. A few acted like Shadow and Draco didn't exist, but others shot wary and curious glances their way. Shadow, his empathy long since closed, offered a faint smile to those who were brave enough to meet his eyes.

"Come on. I'll show you your room," Draco offered when they were the last ones in the common room.

He led Shadow over to the right-hand staircase, explaining that all the girls rooms would be up the left-hand stairs. There was a spell barrier on both that prevented those of the opposite sex to pass. If you wanted to meet in co-ed groups but didn't want to use the common room you could use the six large sitting rooms that were down a hallway across from the fireplace.

"The room you are assigned is the one you keep for the rest of your years here. I just happened to come in the year that the graduating Seventh-years had occupied the first level, so that's my room."
He pointed to the third door on the left. There were only two doors on the right and he gestured at them. "Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle." Then to the two doors next to his room. "Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott."

"Do all the students here have private rooms?" Shadow asked, memorizing the names that belonged to doors.

"The Ravenclaws also have private rooms like this. I believe Gryffindor and Hufflepuff have each year sharing a single room," Draco answered as he lead them further up.

This year, the Sixth-years had the second floor, the Seventh-years the third, the First-years the fourth, the Second-years the fifth, the Third-years the sixth, and finally the Fourth-years had the last, the seventh floor. Next year, everyone would keep their same room, giving the third floor to the new First-years.

Shadow smiled wryly. "Of course I'm at the top. At least it's defensible and good exercise."

Draco laughed.

There were only four doors on this level. Draco pointed to each. The first on the left belonged to Miles Bletchy, the second to Curtis Warrington, who was Seventh-year Slytherin Chaser Darien Warrington's little brother. The first door on the left belonged to Rogan Harper, Miles's best friend. The last door had appeared while they were all at the feast and was Shadow's room.

The room was large. It had a four poster bed with thin curtains that matched the green curtains that covered the far wall. Grinning, Draco strode across the room and flung them open. Shadow gasped in surprise, his eyes wide.

The wall was a window, but it wasn't a normal window. Dim, green-white moonlight poured into the room as they looked out at water, fish, and beautiful plants. It was breathtaking and enchanting. Best of all, Shadow felt like he was utterly safe for this matched the environment of his mental terrain and his Occlumency shields.

"It's my favorite part of the room," Draco admitted, staring out into the depths of the night-dark lake. "Sometimes we even see mermaids and mermen. All the dorm rooms have a window like this."

"It's incredible," Shadow whispered. He came up to his friend's side and for a while they just stood there watching the lake.

Anyway." Draco shook himself and turned to look into the strange duel-colored eyes. "We usually leave our doors open, unless we're sleeping or don't want to be disturbed. That way your year-mates can come and go. There's usually always someone in the common room studying, which is an unspoken invite to join them, or playing chess."

"Thank you." Shadow smiled. "They're a tough crowd, but I think we can take them."

"You bet we can." Draco turned and went to the door. "I'm going to get unpacked. If you want to come down, you may. Do you want your door open or shut?"

"Open," Shadow answered, smiling playfully at the thought of the curious coming to his door.

Draco laughed again and disappeared down the hall.

Shadow unpacked and familiarized himself with the room. There was a dresser, a desk, and a bookshelf that he slowly filled with his favorite and most used books. His trunk sat at the end of his
bed. He found himself missing Hedwig. The snowy owl was left at the thickly warded Snape house. She was too recognizable as Harry Potter's for him to bring her. Maybe he could get a cat or something. Although any pet he had would only become a target. It was probably best that he make due without one.

He didn't get any visitors. The three boys in his year kept their doors firmly shut. Draco wasn't as lucky. Students from Fifth-year and up dropped by the blond's room, asking subtle questions about why he turned to the Light side and also wondering what the relationship was between Severus and Shadow. Were they father and son? Uncle and nephew? Was he adopted?

Draco sneered at the Death Eater questions, not willing to reveal the abuse he suffered at his father's hands, but he did reveal that Shadow was Severus's natural son. He didn't say more than that. They would have to get the balls to ask Shadow for themselves if they wanted more information. The only reason he said anything at all was because he figured it afforded Shadow some measure of protection.

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The curtains were half open allowing faint light into the room. Shadow slept soundly in his bed, his arm flung out beside him and the blankets tugged halfway down his chest. Unfortunately, this rare untroubled sleep was about to be disturbed. A teenager wearing a Gryffindor school robe shook Shadow's shoulder, making the teen sit up with a gasp and bring his wand around, which he had hidden under his pillow.

"Godric!" Shadow hissed and allowed his arm to drop. "What do you think you're doing? What time is it?"

"Just after one in the morning. I had to wait until everyone else in your House was sleeping to be sure only you heard what I'm about to tell you," the phantom explained, impatiently brushing his shoulder-length brown hair out of his face. Usually the muscular teen had it pulled back in a ponytail or braid, but it hung loose now, giving the phantom the appearance of having just got out of bed himself.

"Tell me what?" Shadow asked irritably.

"Dumbledore left a message for you, Harry Potter, protected by my wards. Here." Godric raised his hands and a Pensieve shimmered into sight on the nightstand.

Shadow stared at the thing suspiciously. He didn't want to touch anything that Dumbledore had left for him. It was probably poisoned or something.

"I cannot let you leave until you see what is inside," Godric told him, eyes burning with the purpose of his mission.

"Will it hurt me?"

"It is only memories," the phantom assured him and gestured urgently at the bowl of silver light.

Shadow knew he was going to regret this, but he stood and placed his face in the bowl anyway.

He found himself in Dumbledore's office. The deceased Headmaster stood at a window, looking out into the sunny sky. He turned as if hearing Shadow's arrival. The teen snorted. The man was determined to appear all-powerful.

"Harry, my dear boy, if you are watching this memory right now, then I have passed on from this
world. And if it is as I fear, then I left you alone with a great burden to shoulder," the old man said kindly, eyes shimmering with sympathy.

"Please," Shadow sneered, unimpressed. "Just get on with it."

"As you know, the night you rebounded the Killing Curse, you should have killed Voldemort for good. But he is still alive. I've discovered the reason for his survival," Dumbledore said gravely. "The Dark Lord has used an ancient Dark ritual to protect himself from death, but he is not immortal as he would have us believe! Remember this, my boy. You must destroy each protection before Voldemort is destroyed for good. If I am correct, Voldemort should have no more than seven such protections. One was destroyed, I believe, in your Second-year. I have an idea as to the location of at least three others. When you are ready, they will be made known to you."

Shadow rolled his eyes, furious. This was unbelievable! Dumbledore was managing to meddle even from beyond the damn grave! There was no escaping his machinations it seemed.

"Stay strong, dear Harry," the man smiled benevolently. "Only you have the power to defeat Voldemort. The Wizarding World may be ignorant of your destiny, but I am not. I am proud of you and have faith that you will overcome this evil. We are all counting on you, my boy."

He was rejected violently from the Pensieve.

With a sharp cry of pain, he fell heavily on his hip. Shadow glared at the offending bowl and Dumbledore's last attempt to manipulate him. 'Depending on you', my ass, he thought angrily. Dumbledore was just trying to make him feel responsible for everyone and everything! If the old bastard really cared about everyone, he would just say flat out what these damn protections were! Why lead him around with riddles and hints? It was another goddamn test!

Shadow was furious. Voldemort was dead! Dead! But that damn thing was saying he wasn't. That he had protections that would prevent him from dying, allowing him to be brought back again and again.

Ripping open his drawers, he threw on some jeans and a T-shirt. He didn't bother with socks or shoes. "Can I take that?" he demanded, gesturing sharply at the hated thing.

Godric shook his head solemnly. "No. When you are done here, I will destroy it."

Shadow spun and slammed out of his room. He was too mad to care if it woke the other fourth year boys. He was too busy contemplating Voldemort being back and that the Dark Lord would be pissed off more than ever over the confrontation with Demon months ago. If Voldemort hadn't wanted to kill him before, he definitely would now!

Minutes later, he stormed through the door of his father's quarters and slammed it shut, panting and red in the face. Severus came running out. He looked torn between anger at the scare and worry as he demanded angrily, "What?" he demanded, gesturing sharply at the hated thing.

Godric shook his head solemnly. "No. When you are done here, I will destroy it."

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As soon as he finished viewing his son's memory of the Pensieve encounter, he strode purposefully back to his bedroom.

"What?" Shadow demanded, following.

Severus didn't answer. He unlocked the wards around the hidden bookshelf in the corner and began flipping through a book. He put it down and picked up a second.
Shadow watched, silent, arms crossed and glaring. Now that his anger was fading, he realized that most of his ire was due to fear. He didn't think he could survive another confrontation like what happened in the graveyard. The mere thought made him break out in a cold sweat. Roughly running his hands through his curls, he bit his lip. He had thought he was past this finally. That Voldemort was gone from his life forever and wouldn't be able to hurt him again. He left that all behind when he abandoned the name Harry Potter and became Shadow Snape.

"Read this," Severus said tightly. He passed over the old, leather-bound tome. The title read: Secrets of the Darkest Art.

Shadow took it and walked backward to sit on the bed. The ritual described was gruesome and horrifying. "A Horcrux? He made 'horrible crosses'? Why would anyone do this to themselves?" he asked faintly, sickened. He shut the book and put it on the bed out of reach. "And Dumbledore thinks he made seven? My god, it's a wonder Voldemort isn't a gibbering mad creature by this point."

"The Dark Lord's sanity has disintegrated. This explains a lot, actually. I should have thought of it," Severus murmured, watching his son worriedly. "It also explains why the captured Death Eaters said the Dark Lord was alive but ill. He is still recovering from a second resurrection."

"They said what?" Shadow yelled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought it was merely something Lucius told the others to keep them in line."

"I witnessed the Dark Lord's death, do not forget. I didn't grant much credibility to such claims until now."

Shadow scowled but let it go. It didn't really matter. "So... How do you kill a Horcrux?"

"The only way to destroy one is to use something so destructive there is no conceivable way to reconstruct the object through magic or any other means."

"Second-year... Basilisk venom.... So the diary was one," Shadow considered.

Severus nodded. "It sounds very much like one in retrospect and there is only one known cure for basilisk venom. I trust phoenix tears weren't applied to the wound in the diary?"

"Nope." Shadow smiled. "Well, one down, then. Why couldn't Dumbledore just tell me what the others are?"

"I believe you destroyed a second one in the graveyard," Severus offered. "I think Demon is just as destructive as a basilisk."

"But he didn't destroy an item like a diary, did he?" he frowned.

"Once the soul-piece is taken out and made into a body, the body becomes the new vessel. I saw the Dark Lord's body dissolve, destroyed utterly."

"That's something at least," Shadow sighed and rubbed at his eyes tiredly. "So two down, five to go. Do you think the nursery counts as one?"

"No. A Killing Curse isn't quite destructive enough. I think the Dark Lord fled as a spirit to a prepared vessel, a prepared Horcrux. I believe the same happened over the Philosopher's Stone."

"So five then."
"I have something more to tell you. I didn't mention it because I thought it was already fulfilled."
Severus came and knelt in front of his son. "The reason the Dark Lord targeted the Potters, the reason he still targets you now, is because of a prophecy. I heard the first part and took it to him when I was still faithful, but I thought it was talking about the Longbottoms."

"What prophecy?" Shadow gritted out, his hands clenched into angry fists.

Severus took a deep breath and repeated, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... That's as much as the Dark Lord knows, but there is more... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

"Well that's just great." Shadow stood and flung up his arms. "So there's no escaping Voldemort. One way or another, we're going to keep coming face to face until one of us is permanently dead. And the likelihood of that being me is pretty high."

"Do not say so," Severus said roughly, arresting Shadow’s agitated pacing by gently capturing his shoulders. "You have survived more confrontations than anyone else ever could."

" Barely!" Shadow interrupted hotly.

"You will defeat him. You have a power he knows not."

"I never took you as naïve," he sneered

"Because I am not," the man answered through tight lips. "I speak of the unbelievable power you possess. Empathy, remarkable healing ability, and destructive capabilities strong enough to destroy a Horcrux. You are strong enough to defeat the Dark Lord. The prophecy is correct."

Shadow didn't say anything. He didn't really think empathy was going to help him. As for the other talents Severus was accrediting him with, he didn't consider them his own. Boy and Demon were different identities. Identities that he never planned on making a part of himself again. He didn't want what those two had to offer him: madness and pain.

"It's late. Here..." Severus went to his bedside and took out a potion from the nightstand. He gave it to Shadow and placed his hands on his shoulder's, squeezing tightly. "Return to bed and take this. We can't do anything about this tonight. You need sleep."

Shadow stopped at the threshold and looked back over his shoulder. "Thank you, Dad."

Severus stared at the door speechlessly for several minutes after Shadow left.

Chapter end.
Shadow stood in a quiet corner of the common room. Other groups of Slytherins were waiting for friends as well, but none of them came close to the curly-haired teen. They tried to not even look his way. It was a bit disappointing. He had expected it, this was the House of discretion after all, but he wanted to break through this wall as soon as possible. He'd need to have some of them on his side if his plan for Hogwarts was going to work. To this end, he decided to go over to the closest group. The two boys stiffened and kept their heads down. He ignored these signs that they weren't interested in conversation.

"Hi. I'm Shadow Snape. What year are you in?"

The boys sighed, resigned, and met his eyes. The one on the right was thin with sandy-colored hair. He stood five-foot-four inches tall, which was only two inches shorter than Shadow. He ducked his head, obviously uneasy, but the auburn-haired boy next to him held Shadow's gaze unflinchingly. His hair fell to his shoulders and he was unmistakably pretty, about an inch taller than his friend.

"I'm Rogan Harper, and that's Miles Bletchy. We're Fourth-years."

Shadow smiled. "I wanted to introduce myself last night, but I was tired and thought you might want to go to bed early as well."

"Are you Professor Snape's son?" Rogan asked. His hazel green eyes were even, challenging. Miles looked up curiously at the question but bit his lips, worried.

"Yes. I've been home schooled until now. Father thought it wasn't safe at home anymore."

"Your eyes… They're weird," Rogan pointed out.

"Heterochromia. I have different levels of melanin in each eye," Shadow explained. Hopefully they would spread the word and everyone got over the strangeness soon. "Do you like it here? Is it fun going to a big school like this?"

"Sometimes." Rogan turned his attention to the stairs, the person they had been waiting for appearing.

A girl with thick, chin length, brown hair and silver eyes stepped up to them. She looked Shadow up and down and bluntly asked, "Are you a Seer or something?"

"Not that I know of." Shadow shrugged. "It's just a small chemical imbalance. It doesn't really mean anything."

"People with eyes like that are either Seers or Cursed, and not in a spell sense," the girl argued. "If you're a Cursed One, then I don't think you should hang out with us."

"What's your name?" Shadow asked.

"Lillian Derrick," she answered. "We're going to be late for breakfast. Come on, Miles, Rogan."

Shadow wondered if what the girl said was true. Maybe he was a Seer. He did have empathy, but it didn't really feel like it. So maybe he was a little bit of both: half Seer, half Cursed One.
"Ready? Sorry for keeping you waiting," Draco said. He was wearing his school uniform, his hair impeccably gelled back.

"No problem. I was just talking to Miles and Rogan." As they walked to the Great Hall, he told Draco about Lillian's accusations.

Draco frowned. "I think it's all superstitious crap to be honest. I mean, there are a lot of Seers who don't have eyes like that. And there are a lot of people with bad luck who have normal eyes, too. I think it's a coincidence. After all, you didn't always have eyes like that."

Shadow nodded thoughtfully. "How was your night? Reconnect with any of your friends?"

"Lots of people came by asking about you or sneering at me for being a traitor, but nothing beneficial," Draco admitted, taking a seat at the Slytherin table.

"Well, if they don't come around, they'll eventually find out the hard way that you're right."

"Hopefully it doesn't come to that for all of them," Draco murmured, looking down the table at Blaise and Pansy. He had been fond of them over everyone else in their year.

Halfway through breakfast, Severus strode down the aisle, his robes billowing as he passed out schedules. Being Thursday, they would only have two days of classes before the weekend. That was going to be nice. Draco accepted his schedule and Shadow took his own, eagerly opening it.

Monday he had Ancient Runes with Third-year students from all four Houses, Herbology with the Fifth-year Hufflepuffs, and Transfiguration with the Fifth-year Gryffindors. Wednesday was the same except he had Potions with the Seventh-year Gryffindors and Slytherins instead of Transfiguration. Tuesday and Thursday he had Charms with the Sixth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, Defense Against the Dark Arts with the Seventh-year Gryffindors and Slytherins, and History with the Fourth-year Slytherins. Friday was only Potions and Transfiguration.

Shadow sighed. "Looks like I don't have any classes with you."

Draco took his schedule. "You have Defense today. Be careful."

"I'm always careful." Shadow smiled. "We both have a free period before dinner. Want to go check out the snake downstairs?"

"That would be fun." Draco grinned. They had to be extra careful, though. If anyone found out Shadow could speak Parseltongue, people would connect the dots between Shadow and Harry Potter.

"All right. I'll see you there." Shadow stood and made his way out of the room and toward his first class of the day: Charms.

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"Ah, Mr. Snape." Flitwick came hurrying over as soon as he saw the curly-haired teen. The little man smiled and took Shadow's hand, leading him passed the curious stares of the Sixth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. "What do you think of Hogwarts so far?"

"It's wonderful," Shadow answered, not comfortable with the hand holding his own. Sweat slicked his palm and dampened his face.

"Good, good. Well, if you have any problems, my door is always open," Flitwick assured him. "I
made a map for you, so you don't get lost."

"Thank you, Professor."

The little dwarf had met Shadow at Grimmauld Place when he had come to test him. He had been just as excitable then, too. Shadow liked him, but he was still greatly relieved when Flitwick released him after guiding him to a seat at the front. He began taking out parchment and quills when Flitwick called on someone in the class.

"Yes, Mr. Carmichael?"

Shadow turned to see a strawberry blond Ravenclaw boy sliding him curious glances.

"Professor, I was just wondering why Snape gets to be in higher classes."

"Mr. Snape? Care to answer?" Flitwick asked the young teen.

Shadow shrugged. "I was home schooled. Before coming here, I was given placement tests by all the teachers."

"Yes, but many Ravenclaws are ahead of the curriculum, but no one has skipped a grade," Eddie Carmichael protested.

"No one has asked," Flitwick responded. He folded his hands before him thoughtfully. "I believe no one really considers doing so. You like to stay with your year mates, after all. Plus, you can study independently and still enjoy the classes. Mr. Snape had no such bonds of friendship to consider."

Carmichael nodded and fell silent.

"What about his eyes?" Zacharias Smith asked.

"Ah, yes." Flitwick smiled again. "I suppose we can discuss this for today, but expect to begin your lessons next class. So, heterochromia... It is when the eyes have different levels of a chemical called melanin..."

Shadow sighed as the lecture about heterochromia continued, followed by a theoretical discussion about the myths surrounding the condition. The only good thing about it was that by the time class was over, no one thought it was that strange or took the myths so seriously. It's pretty hard to be afraid of something you just spent almost two hours dissecting.

"Thanks, Professor Flitwick," Shadow said as he was leaving.

"No problem, my dear boy." Flitwick grinned. "Hopefully we'll knock some sense into the rest of the school."

Shadow laughed, feeling buoyed. Last night things had looked really grim, but with people like Professor Flitwick on his side maybe he could get through this.

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Shadow found Fred and George fairly easily outside the Defense classroom. They wrapped their arms around his neck and made jokes until he was laughing with them. The other Seventh-year Gryffindors watched with amused expressions. There was no telling how the twins would take to new people, and it looked like they had decided to adopted the youngest Snape. The Slytherins in the room weren't as amused. They sneered and rolled their eyes discretely.
"Good morning, class," Umbridge tittered as she stepped into the room. With a wave of her wand, the curtains on the windows were flung open, allowing a flood of sunlight into the classroom. "I said, 'Good morning, class!'"

"Good morning, Professor Umbridge," they called back, Fred and George loudest in a mocking sing-song voice. The Gryffindors snickered.

"There now," she said with a sickly sweet smile. "Wands away, quills out, please. The teaching in this subject has been fragmented. I believe we shall return to basics! A good foundation is everything, don't you agree? Rest assured we will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please."

The dull course aims were put on the board and they were all instructed to read the first chapter of their very dull book. Of course, this wasn't so smart with the twins in the room. Their attention immediately wandered and soon Patricia Vaisley, the Slytherin Keeper, was hissing at them for making her hair gooey with a slime egg from their joke shop experiments.

"Ah hum," Umbridge cleared her throat, but she was staring at Shadow, who was sitting next to the twins. "Please don't disrupt the class or I'll be forced to hand out a detention. I know this class must be boring for some of you who are more interested in Dark Arts themselves than the Defense of them. You will just have to do away with those inclinations because the Ministry has taken a stance of no-tolerance for any and all Dark Arts. Understand?"

Shadow just stared back into her sharp blue eyes.

"I asked if you understood, Mr. Snape."

"Yes, Professor Umbridge. I wasn't aware you were talking to me."

"Of course, dear. Who else would I be talking to?"

"Perhaps the source of the disruption." Shadow smiled innocently, blinking wide eyes slowly.

"But you are the source of disruption, are you not? Both here in my classroom and in Hogwarts."

By this point, everyone was staring at them: the Gryffindors bewildered, the twins actually growing angry, while the Slytherins watched with blank, examining eyes.

"No, Professor Umbridge. I am not," Shadow corrected gently.

"Ten points from Slytherin, Mr. Snape. For talking back to a teacher," she smiled, displaying small pointy teeth, reminding him of a piranha. "Nothing to say, Mr. Snape?"

Shadow still sat calmly, but fury was flashing behind his eyes. He hated this woman. She represented the Ministry who was incompetent and corrupt. More importantly, she represented a threat to his father. She had been there at their hearing and enjoyed their discomfort and the imprisonment of Severus's magic. She was a sadistic monster.

"No, Professor Umbridge. I have nothing to add to this discussion."

"Ten more points, Mr. Snape. For your insolence."

"Yes, Miss Umbridge."

"Professor, dear. Call me Professor Umbridge." Satisfied, practically floating off the floor, she
returned to the front of the room. "Return to your readings class," she rebuked lightly.

"I say, Gred," George said with mock distress. "I just noticed these course aims are lacking…"

"You're right, Forge!"

"Is there a problem, boys?" Umbridge asked.

"Well, you see, Miss Undersecretary for the Ministry…"

"…and not really a Defense professor…"

"…There is nothing here about practicing defensive spells."

Umbridge stared at them, then turned her eyes on Shadow once more. "Detention, Mr. Snape. Five thirty tomorrow night. If you have complaints, speak them for yourself. Don't have others speak for you."

Fred and George gaped at her, but then shut their mouths. Their eyes grew sparkling and hard. The Gryffindors, seeing this, winced. Umbridge had made the wrong enemies.

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," Shadow answered calmly, almost smiling. The bitch of a woman was actually doing him a favor. For not only were the twins pissed, but the Slytherins were beginning to look upset as well, and not at him. Their slightly narrowed eyes were directed at Umbridge. She was making him allies without Shadow having to do anything.

"Now, I can't imagine you needing to use defensive spells in my classroom. Surely, you won't be attacked here. Hogwarts is safe; the Ministry is making sure of it." She hummed contentedly and waved at the staring Seventh-years. "Back to your readings please."

No one said another word. After class there was a rush for the door. The twins each grabbed one of Shadow's arms and stopped him a good distance down the corridor.

"Sorry, mate." George frowned. "Didn't mean for you to get in so much trouble."

"It's not your fault," Shadow assured them. "She has it out for me and my father. She would have found a way to make me suffer no matter what you did or didn't do."

"Still…" Fred scowled. "That was right nasty of her."

"But we should be thankful…" George slowly smiled.

Fred matched his expression. "It's gits like that who really inspire us."

Shadow laughed. "Have fun, but don't get in too much trouble. She's vicious and has a lot of power right now."

"Oh, don't worry, mate," Fred reassured him. "We can take care of ourselves. Right, Forge?"

"Right-o!"

Shadow shook his head and watched the twins caper and cackle down the hallway.

At lunch, Shadow explained what happened in DADA, his face serious, but Draco could see the sparkle in his eyes. The blond was clever and he saw the sneers the older Slytherins were directing toward Umbridge up at the staff table. Nothing brought people together like shared adversity.
Slytherin was used to teachers being unfair to their House and had been trained to stand together against it as much as possible. Shadow had become one of them the moment a teacher singled him out for unfair persecution.

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History with Remus was as interesting as ever. They had to pretend not to know each other, though. The Fourth-year Slytherins, his year mates, shot him sideways glances all during the class. None of them would talk to him still, but Shadow felt he was making progress.

"How are things?" Remus asked softly. The curly-haired teen was the last in the class, still lingering over packing his bag.

"Okay. Pretty much how I expected it." Shadow smiled wryly, but then he turned serious. "Be careful. Umbridge is a real bitch. If she finds out about your condition…"

"I'm aware. Don't worry about me."

"Just be careful." He frowned. "Can you give this to Neville?" Shadow pulled out the communicating parchment Draco had borrowed. He still had the master copy so they could use them to instant message each other at night.

"Sure." Remus smiled. "And don't forget to write Padfoot. I'm sure he'd love to hear from you."

"I will. Thanks!" Shadow called as he hurried from the room.

The halls were pretty deserted since people were either in class or doing something else during their break. Shadow made his way to the seventh floor bathroom and found Draco already waiting there, talking to a simpering Moaning Myrtle. They learned the hard way it was better just to keep the weepy ghost happy.

"Hey," Draco greeted.

"Hey." Shadow went to the sink and hissed for it to open.

They both waved to the ghost and jumped down. The basilisk was just how they left it. Its venom so strong that it preserved the corpse and kept it from rotting.

"What are we going to do about Umbridge?" Draco asked casually, taking a seat on one of the chairs they had transfigured from rubble.

"Nothing." Shadow scowled, brushing black curls off his forehead. "As much as I want to, doing anything will lose me the only advantage I have and place Severus in danger of her wrath. She has to think she has control over me."

Draco glared, eyes glinting. He didn't like the sound of that at all.

"I have something else I need to tell you." Shadow shook his head and changed the subject. "Dumbledore left me something last night."

"What!" Draco jumped to his feet, face pale and furious. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but listen to this." Shadow explained everything he learned about the prophecy and Voldemort being alive, but he also told Draco something he hadn't mentioned to his father yet. "I was thinking. You know those awful dreams I had, of wanting to let Demon Out? That corridor and
the door…”
"Yeah? What about them?"
"What if it wasn't me? What if it was Voldemort?"
The blond paled. "What do you mean?"
Shadow quickly explained the visions he got through Demon last year. About seeing the old man killed and the conversations with Wormtail. Draco looked even more distressed.
"But you know Occlumency!" he protested.
"Yeah. I'm much better at it now, but… I don't know… Voldemort and I are connected. What if I can't block him all the way? What if we're dreaming of each other?"
"You have to tell Professor Snape," Draco said lowly.
Shadow sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I should, I know, but…"
"No. You have to tell him. You're in danger. If the Dark Lord figures out who Demon is, how he relates to you, then you're finished. Worse, he wants to possess Demon instead of just wanting to kill him! … No. You have to tell him. This is serious."
"I know," he answered glumly.
Draco came over and put his hands on his best friend's shoulders. His eyes practically glowing with concern. "What is it? Why are you reluctant?"
"It's just… If that connection is still there, it's kind of useful. It helped a lot last year. Severus will try to find a way to shut it down permanently."
"It didn't really help," Draco insisted. "It didn't tell you anything you couldn't figure out on your own. It's too big of a risk. I'm all for short-cuts, but not when it could cost you your life. We'll just have to trust the Order to be able to monitor the Death Eater activities, maybe convert another student who has Death Eater connections and who's willing to pass us information."
"You're right, of course.” Shadow smiled at him lopsidedly. Draco squeezed his shoulders once more and let his arms fall. The brunet laughed. "So you can see Dolores Umbridge is the least of my worries, though."
"Yeah. You're right. We need to focus on consolidating a support base," Draco murmured thoughtfully. He walked over to the head of the basilisk and stared into it's empty eye sockets. "Good thing we didn't correct Professor Snape's story that the Dark Lord was back and the Order is already working under that assumption. If we had said, 'He's back, but gone now', and then came to school and said, 'Oops, he's not really gone, he's back for the second time', no one would believe us."
"We thought it wouldn't hurt for them to be extra careful in finding the remaining Death Eaters.” Shadow shook his head tiredly. "Turns out their caution was more needed than we thought."
Draco turned around and faced his friend. "This is going to be a lot harder than we thought it would be."
"Yeah," Shadow agreed, ducking his head with a deep frown.
"We need to plan," Draco said decisively. He tucked his hair behind his ears and strode over to the
table they usually used for dissecting and bottling. He pulled out parchment and spread it out. "We need a list of objectives, immediate and future. We need to write a list of possible allies in the school, and we need a plan to recruit."

Shadow watched his friend. He was amazed. They were facing unbelievable odds, almost certain torture and death, and yet here Draco was, strategizing for their success. He was bent over the table, writing furiously, eyes silver with determination. Shadow couldn't help the grin that broke across his face. Stepping up to the table, he added his own voice to the plans.

"I want to unite Hogwarts. You heard what the Hat said. This castle is going to be an important base to hold since Voldemort is going to focus on taking it. By stalling him here, we can minimize the damage other targets may take." Shadow grabbed the quill and wrote this down. "But Hogwarts isn't going to last if the students inside can't help defend it. The DADA class is worse than useless."

"If we can gather a small group to work on defense in secret, say invite Longbottom, Granger, and the Weasleys, and slowly add some people from other Houses, eventually we'll have common ground as well as a well-trained core of students." Draco said excitedly.

"Convincing them to work together is going to be difficult." Shadow shook his head. He bit his lip. "First we need to win over some Slytherins. Otherwise running around and meeting other House members in secret is going to be very suspicious. Not to mention we have to first find a place that Umbridge won't find us. I've got a feeling she's not going to allow us to practice even on our own."

Draco nodded, agreeing. He began to write names down on a new sheet. "These are all the Slytherins. I'll put a star next to neutral names, a check next to those who are distantly connected to Death Eaters, and I'll underline those who I know support the Dark Lord personally."

Shadow watched as fifty-two names were put on paper. (Slytherin was always the smallest House.) Once done, Draco started from the top starring, checking, and underlining almost every single name except for a small majority that Draco was unsure about.

"It would be best if we worked from our years out, less suspicious that way," Shadow murmured. He looked at the fourth year names. Miles Bletchy, Rogan Harper, and Lillian Derrick were neutral. Marianna Rowle, Curtis Warrington, and Lenora Selwyn were underlined as personal supporters of the Dark Lord. "Tell me about them."

"Rowle is a niece to an active Death Eater; the Warringtons are nephews. Rowle is an old Pureblood line, but Warrington has some Half-blood and Muggleborn lineage in their recent genealogy. They are more ruthless because of it, trying to prove themselves, but the worst is Selwyn. Not only are they Pureblood, they are wealthy and powerful. They've supported the Dark Lord from the beginning. Lenora Selwyn is the daughter of an inner circle Death Eater."

Shadow nodded, memorizing all of this. He looked to the Fifth-year names. "Who are you going to start with?"

"Pansy's father is a Death Eaters, same with Theodore, Crabbe, and Goyle. Blaise and Daphne are neutral. Millicent has Death Eater cousins, but she's been reluctant to full-heartedly agree with the Dark Lord's aims... I think I'll start with Blaise and Pansy. They were closest to me; hell, Pansy thought she was in love with me," Draco explained and looked over at his friend with a dark smile.

Shadow smiled back, blood pumping in his veins with anticipation. They had a plan. They had targets. The danger, the importance placed on their succeeding, only made it that much more intense. He nodded. "Let's do this."
The next morning, Shadow woke and quickly got dressed. After breakfast he was scheduled to have a free study period, but instead he was going to be taking his Ordinary Wizarding Level exam in Charms. An official Ministry tester would be waiting for him in an empty classroom near the Entrance Hall.

"Good luck," Draco called with a wave.

"Thanks." Shadow smiled and made his way to the room he had been told about.

The test went fairly well. The examiner remained serious and focused, not paying too much attention to him one way or another, never once looking at his forehead. The man didn't even notice his strange eyes. It was a unique experience and Shadow left him with a large smile on his face.

Severus noticed his son's good mood instantly as Shadow stepped into the Potions lab. He was with only a handful of the Seventh-year Gryffindors and Slytherins, as most chose not to take this class. Fred and George asked him loudly how it went. He gave them a thumbs up and the twins did a relatively restrained celebratory dance.

"Back to work," Severus snapped.

Shadow took up a position in the back and quickly got his things in order. They were brewing complicated muscle healing potions. Shadow studied the instructions and listened intently to Severus's lecture about the brewing process and properties of the ingredients. By the time the class was over, Shadow had a pretty good base to work with next time.

"Shadow," Severus called.

The teen turned at the door, his bag on his shoulder.

The man nodded, acknowledging his confidence about the Charms exam.

Shadow smiled and went to lunch.

Draco was talking to Blaise while Pansy shot them strange looks, so he sat by himself and read from a DADA text that wasn't in Umbridge's curriculum. That woman wouldn't know good defense if it hit her in the face. After the meal, he hurried back to the empty classroom. He had another free period and was taking his DADA OWL.

He froze in the doorway when he saw not only a Ministry examiner but also Umbridge waiting for him.

"Come in, come in." The woman smiled sweetly. "We don't want you any later to your next class then you have to be."

Shadow continued forward. He ignored the hated woman completely, keeping his eyes locked on the examiner. The man was in his early thirties and was staring at Umbridge with a nervous and awed expression. It wasn't very promising.

As the two hours of testing passed, however, Shadow learned he didn't have much to worry about. Umbridge just watched. She never said a word. Almost more disturbed by this than if she had done something nasty, Shadow left her with the examiner and went to his Transfiguration class.

Professor Krum scowled. "Mr. Snape. Sit. Please." His English was much improved from last year.
Shadow looked around at the Fifth-year Gryffindors and took a seat next to Neville. Neville gave him an unobtrusive smile that Shadow returned. They listened intently to the lecture and took notes. When they were asked to take out small china cups to turn into pillows, Shadow whispered to his brother, "Are we still on for tonight?"

"Yeah. Come to the courtyard I use with Miss Flitwick," Neville whispered back. "I have a session with her after dinner."

"I'll be there as soon as I get out of my detention." Shadow heard a loud snort and looked up to see Ron glaring in disgust at Hermione who was blushing furiously. Shadow glanced at Krum and saw him scowling down at his notes. He smiled. "How's that working out?"

Neville grinned. "Hermione gave a big lecture about how she knew it was improper and they would wait until weekends or the summer to get together again. If this is how they're starting, I don't think that vow will last." His expression sobered and he looked at his brother. "I really need to talk to you about something."

"I gathered you did from what you wrote last night." Shadow frowned. "I have a lot to tell you, too. Is anything wrong?"

Neville shook his head. "Not exactly. We'll talk about it later."

"Mr. Snape! Mr. Longbottom! Please focus on the assignment, yes?" The nineteen-year-old Krum glared at them.

"Yes, Professor," Shadow and Neville said together and didn't say anything else.

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"Mr. Snape," Umbridge said sweetly as she came up behind the teen.

Dinner started at five and she had told him to be at detention at five thirty. Shadow quickly cast Tempus and saw that it was five eighteen. He looked up at Umbridge with a raised eyebrow, swallowing his mouthful of potatoes.

"I've been informed that the examiner who was going to test you tomorrow morning for your Potions OWL had a family crisis, so she will be testing you tonight instead. Five thirty, Potions classroom. Our detention has been rescheduled for tomorrow, same time."

"Yes, Professor," Shadow acknowledged. She waited for a thank you, but he just smiled at her. She smiled back and left the table.

"You ready for it?" Draco asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Course.” Shadow took another bite and stood. The Potions classroom was further away than Umbridge's office. He should leave early. He didn't even want to think about the detention with Umbridge. That woman was furious and whatever she had planned was sure to be worse now.

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Shadow stood tiredly beside the door to the courtyard in which Neville was practicing his Earth magic. He smelled of potions, reminding him of the grueling past hour. He wondered if the woman who had tested him was related to Severus somehow. She was extremely exacting and her preoccupation with whatever crisis that had called for her to test him tonight instead of tomorrow had her in a foul mood.
"Shadow," Neville greeted. The brunet looked just as tired, but he smelled of dirt instead of potions.

Shadow smiled wryly. They made quite the pair. "Let's talk in that bathroom near here. It should be safe."

When they arrived, Shadow said, "Okay," and leaned against the tiled wall. He had already cast a few privacy wards. "Do you want to go first?"

“No.” Neville shook his head. He was too distracted and needed to pull his thoughts together. "You go first."

Shadow nodded and proceeded to explain about Voldemort, the prophecy, and their plan to unite the four Houses to help defend the castle. Neville listened to all of this, his mouth falling open several times.

"Oh, Merlin! I'm so sorry, Shadow!" he cried when the shorter teen fell silent. "That's awful!"

"Tell me about it," Shadow sighed, running a hand through his curls. He slid down the wall and looked up at his brother, his arms propped on his knees. "I thought this was over. That at least Voldemort was gone. Now he's not. Not only do I have to fear revenge from the Death Eaters, but the Dark Lord is going to come after me again. I'm just glad the Order is already preparing."

"This makes what I wanted to talk to you about worse," Neville admitted. "Gryffindor House is really upset about Harry missing. Hermione and Ron especially. They were crying on each other's shoulders last night, talking about how weird it is to be here without you. Ginny even started crying. Everyone is really scared. They don't know what to think. There has always been a Harry Potter to give them hope. Now there isn't. Even if the Ministry is proclaiming that Voldemort isn't back, some people are saying that the Ministry is lying. Ron and Hermione are the leaders of this group, of course, and a lot of other Gryffindors believe them."

Shadow grimaced and covered his face. "I thought I could just kill Harry off, leave him buried, and finally live a life of my own. I knew the Order and my old friends would be sad, but... They didn't really know me. They didn't really care. That's what I told myself. That they'd get over it. I told myself that I deserved this chance..."

"You do," Neville said softly. He sighed as he sat down next to him. "You do deserve a chance to live your own life, without the pressures of other people watching and judging, but..."

"But they need him," Shadow spoke for him. "They need the Chosen One. And it's not really fair to Ron and Hermione, or even McGonagall, is it? The Order knows the prophecy. They think they're doomed without me."

Neville nodded. He draped his arm loosely over Shadow's shoulders. He knew how hard this was, how frightening. Neville had known Harry a long time, but he had never been as happy as he was as Shadow Snape, Severus's son. It didn't seem fair that his brother had to sacrifice his own happiness for other people. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't want to be Harry Potter," Shadow said firmly, glaring at the opposite wall, but that slowly melted into a crafty expression. "Maybe... Maybe I don't have to be him..."

Neville groaned. "Oh, Merlin, what are you thinking?" he asked reluctantly.

"What if I wrote a letter? To Ron, Hermione, and the Headmistress? I could say that I've been recovering and have decided to stay hidden. I'm training somewhere. That would give hope, wouldn't it, and still let me stay Shadow?"
"Maybe," Neville nodded, frowning in thought. "But that could be too easily verified, right? I mean, you'd have to give more detail than that, but anything you say won't check out because it's not true."

"You're right. A short letter won't cut it. They'll think I'm being held prisoner or something, won't they?" Shadow frowned. "I'll have to write a long enough letter that they'll believe what I tell them and that I'm okay... Maybe I can say I'm somewhere the Ministry doesn't have good connections... I'll have to talk to my father to figure this out; maybe Draco, too."

Neville agreed. "They can help you. Remus could, too."

"Thanks for telling me." Shadow smiled and gently bumped his shoulder. "So besides all this craziness, how's coming back to school been for you?"

Neville laughed. "Pretty normal. I'm not noticed very much, like usual. Ginny and I get to spend time together again. Hermione's happy and frustrated with her boyfriend being here and a teacher. Ron is more depressed than I've ever seen him. The twins are being very mysterious, more so than normal." He glanced at Shadow. "Know why?"

Shadow laughed. "Umbridge really, really pissed them off." He told him what happened in Defense.

"Ouch." Neville winced. "She's not going to know what hit her."

"Nope." Shadow grinned.

"I'd say you're cruel, but she deserves it," Neville said fiercely. "What's her problem anyway?"

"Her problem is the Ministry's problem. They can't face the truth because they're too afraid, so they create enemies they think they can handle. It makes them feel competent and powerful," Shadow sneered. "So right now, the Snapes are that scapegoat. At least until it is irrefutable that Voldemort is back."

"Be careful," Neville sighed. He stood and pulled his brother to his feet. "It's already past curfew. We should go."

"I'll help you sneak back to the tower." Shadow revealed the Map and the Invisibility Cloak.

"Man, does that bring back memories." Neville sighed ruefully as the thin fabric was tossed over their heads. He thought of all the times they had snuck out in just this manner to therapy or secret lessons all last year. "It feels like forever ago, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. This summer was the longest of my life," Shadow agreed.

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Saturday came too soon for the exhausted teen. The only good thing about being so busy was the fact it usually left him too tired to dream. These last two nights had been peaceful.

After breakfast, Shadow went to the library and worked quickly on all the homework he had for all his non-Slytherin classes, so far that amounted to Charms and Transfiguration. All the while, he kept glancing at the Map, trying to memorize who was hanging out with who, where they went and when. He did notice that Draco was with Crabbe, Goyle, and Blaise most of the morning and hoped things were going well.

After lunch, he settled in the common room with the Seventh-year Slytherins that were in his Potions class. They let him work with them on the essay that was assigned but only tentatively. The
conversation was also strewn with tests as the seventeen-year-olds quizzed him, doubtful of his right to be in their class. Shadow answered their questions mostly correctly and there was a grudging silence afterward.

He didn't bother to talk about Defense. No, the time wasn't right to bring that up. By mentioning or even complaining about the unfair treatment he faced, he'd be negating the positive effect of it. Whining isn't what a Slytherin does; they get even. He just had to plan a way to get caught by the right people as he got that revenge. That way he'd gain respect and hopefully acceptance.

Rogan, Miles, and Lillian were no more friendly when he approached them about their History assignment a couple hours later. They let him in, but there was no conversation besides what pertained to the assignment.

Throughout all these interactions and studying, Shadow had a lot of time to observe the Slytherins around them. Being in the common room was like being in a court. It wasn't at all like Gryffindor Tower where you relax and let yourself go. When you were in the common room, eyes were on you, and as long as eyes are on you, you wore a mask. That's why the private sitting rooms were so important and also why the Slytherins very often met and hung out in groups away from the dorms and the common room.

Five o'clock came quickly. He sat with Draco at dinner and they talked of inconsequential things. Draco mostly told him stories and gossip of years past. Shadow was actually interested. Hearing of events he knew first hand but from a Slytherin perspective was interesting. Draco was also setting him up with conversation starters. He could go up to any Slytherin and say, 'Draco was telling me about…', and it would at least get his foot in the door.

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"Come in," Umbridge called sweetly.

Shadow pushed open her office door and stepped into the room. The floor was carpeted in a rich, red-wine color. The walls were painted white, on which hung dozens of moving and mewing framed pictures of kittens. There was a love seat - white with a rose pattern - in front of the elaborate and heavy wooden desk. A floor lamp with a lacy cover stood to the side. The desk itself had dollies and delicate china tea cups. Overall, the room was hideous.

Umbridge stood, wearing her pink cardigan over her robes again. She smiled and gestured with a French-manicured hand toward a student's desk in the corner. It was conspicuous and almost sinister because it's normal appearance didn't fit with the overly frilly, girly decor. Shadow refused to back down though and only hesitated for a moment. He strode over to the desk, sat with a straight back, and put his bag beside him on the floor.

"I'm glad you are on time. I'd hate to have to assign you a second detention," Umbridge cooed sweetly, blue eyes twinkling. She came around her desk and stood beside him.

Shadow stared up at her, forcefully Occluding and keeping his expression blank.

She turned around and grabbed three books from her desk. She handed them over, her smile widening. "Your task is to study these books and write an essay summarizing what you have learned." She glanced at the heavy gold clock on top of her white bookcase. It read 5:34pm. "You have until curfew at nine. This will be counted toward your grade, so do put some effort into it."

"Yes, Professor," Shadow answered evenly and turned to the books.
Umbridge hovered beside him for several minutes, but Shadow wouldn’t start until she backed away. She giggled and drifted back into her ornate armchair behind her desk. Sighing a little, he opened the first book. It only took him three seconds to figure out what this detention was about.

The book was on criminal trials and the different punishments and limitations the Ministry could legally implement. He looked at the second book. It was about all the wizarding prisons and the effect they had on the prisoners. The third book detailed the many different forms of execution the Ministry had utilized throughout history. Umbridge was trying to show him what power she had over him and his father. Shadow grit his teeth and set out to do the assignment.

It was horrific. Maiming, magical bindings, enforced marriages, having memory and/or magic erased; these were just a few of the things he read about. All of them were awful. The dry voice of the author told him in great detail about Mendon Kinder in 1865 who had both his hands and feet permanently removed. He had to totter on stubs, making walking an agony. They surgically grafted his wand to the end of his wrist bone, making casting magic agony as well. The author described the painful procedures in detail. Mendon was allowed no anesthetic or pain relievers. It told about his life after, how it was really just a slow death as the pain wore away at him.

Hillary Redwing was forced to marry a Leonardo MacKillen in 1924. He was supposed to supervise her and make sure she didn't break the law again - she had stolen some jewels from a jewelry store. He was a fine upstanding gentlemen of power. She had only been seventeen. He was forty-eight. Two years later, Hillary killed her husband and was sentenced to a slow hanging. The medical examiner recorded the condition of her body afterwards for records. There was severe scarring on her back, evidence of at least four miscarriages, several broken bones that had not healed correctly, and severe bruising. She had been terribly abused, but it had been legal because he had owned her.

There were vivid pictures attached to each case study. The book had twenty-seven case histories total, all of the supposed criminals suffering extreme and severe punishments for their crimes. Of course, not all of them were innocents. Some were mass murderers, rapists, or child predators. But some were only hungry thieves or people who had harbored suspected rebels.

Despite being determined to show Umbridge nothing, there was a slight tremor in his hands when he opened the next book. Azkaban was the first chapter of five. There were pictures. Of the cells, of the Dementors. Before and after shots of the inmates. It was horrific. Shadow thought of Sirius and felt a new sense of awe and respect for his crazy godfather. Sirius was often volatile, immature, and irrational, but considering what he experienced for almost twelve years… He was heroically strong!

The other prisons were horrific in their own ways. Degrading and dirty, they promised to break the spirit of any who was locked inside. Guards were known to give regular beatings or play sadistic games. Sometimes there were gladiator-type events where prisoners entertained a select group by battling fierce magical predators or armed soldiers. All of it backed up by terrible pictures that spoke a thousand words of suffering; it was all god-awful!

Shadow closed his eyes. He still had one book to go. He opened to the first page and almost gagged, watching a close-up of someone getting beheaded. The book described what happened as the blade cut through skin and bone. Renowned medical experts theorized it took up to three to ten seconds for the person to actually die…

A second is longer than it seems. Shadow closed his eyes. Imagined the pain, the fear of being beheaded, imagined feeling the blade strike through the extremely sensitive nerves in the spinal cord. Sometimes it took up to three swings if the blade wasn’t sharp enough. He held this imagined agony firmly in his mind and counted ten seconds slowly. Opening his eyes, tears threatening to spill, Shadow thought he was going to be sick.
Next came explicit pictures and details about different styles of hanging; all of which could draw out
death for the victim from thirty seconds up to fifteen minutes. Then the book described quartering
where each limb was magically torn slowly from the body, torturing the person for up to an hour,
only to leave the victim bleed to death in minutes. There was a chapter on the Dementor's Kiss. On
poison. On stoning…

It all started to blurred before his eyes. How dare this bitch threaten him and Severus! She wouldn't
lay one goddamned finger on either of them or he'd rip her arms off! Bile seared his throat and he
covered his mouth quickly. Pale, clammy with sweat, he gripped the edges of his desk until his
knuckles creaked.

The soft mewing of the kittens were constantly in the background, making him want to scream, but
now Umbitch was humming. Shadow glanced at her and watched as she poured tea. She caught him
looking and smiled, lazy and utterly content. Her eyes flicked to the clock. He had only twenty
minutes left and had only written two very incoherent paragraphs. Barely in control of himself, he
picked up the quill and began to write.

"Time's up, Mr. Snape." She stood and came to his side.

Shadow rolled the parchment and handed it over, not daring to look up at her face. He knew he was
shaking, knew his eyes were practically iced over with hate. His hands felt dirty from touching those
books. His lungs felt grimy just from breathing her air.

Umbridge took the paper, thrilling at Shadow's seemingly submissive body language. "I should hope
we don't have problems again, Mr. Snape. The Ministry is only here to guide and protect its citizens.
What you've read is only the treatment suffered by those who ignored the Ministry's wise and good
policies."

Shadow nodded once, stiffly. He was about ready to go through her just to get out of that room.

"Dismissed, Mr. Snape." Umbridge smiled, practically vibrating with victory as the young teen fled
her presence.

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Draco was working on homework when Shadow came flying into the common room. The blond
was immediately on his feet, gray eyes wide, as his best friend ran past him, heading for the dorms.

"What happened?" Blaise asked, shocked by Shadow's distressed entrance. Pansy also looked
reluctantly curious.

"He had detention tonight with Umbridge," Draco answered darkly. He didn't bother explaining
anymore. He didn't know much more to tell.

He heard the piano when he reached the second floor. Muted with distance, he could still feel the
low pounding notes. As he got higher, the sound got clearer and he felt his stomach clench with
dread. Something was very wrong for Shadow to be playing like that. The curly-haired teen's
bedroom door was shut, but the loud cascade of the rapid-fire melody vibrated through the corridor.
It sounded like a modern version of 'Flight of the Bumblebee'.

Draco pushed the door open. Shadow sat at the bench, his piano filling up all the space between the
window and the bed. His body rocked forward and back with the relentless beat as his fingers
pounded at the keys. Closing the door carefully behind him, Draco moved across the floor slowly.
As the profile of his friend's face came into view, Draco's dread became a solid weight, transmuting
Shadow's teeth were bared in a snarl as his whole body worked to create the furious melody. There was something wounded about him, despite the ferocious expression. Like he was a cornered animal. Draco was too afraid to stop him, so he retreated to the bed and sat. Speculations of what the detention held and thoughts of revenge occupied him as Shadow lost himself to the music.

The jarring song lasted almost an hour before the relentless notes softened, became noise instead of a song. Draco opened his eyes. What he saw made him clench his fists and grind his teeth with fury. Shadow was crying. He was curled over the keys, hitting them blindly as his shoulders shook and tears coursed down his cheeks. Draco leapt from the bed and roughly pulled him into his arms.

Shadow gasped for air around his sobs. He covered his face and just shook, leaning into the blond's warmth. Draco held him tightly, both of them sitting on the piano bench, Draco facing outwards. Shadow's curls were limp with sweat, but still soft against his cheek. He could feel the moist heat of Shadow's breath against the base of his neck and waited for it to become more even, less shallow.

"What happened?" he growled, no longer able to stand it. "What did she do to you?"

Shadow didn't say anything. He was exhausted from playing, exhausted from keeping himself in control all night. It wasn't just the fear of something happening to Severus or hate for the Ministry and Umbridge that had him breaking down, it was also the graphic and horrific images he had been forced to look through. They reminded him too much of what Demon had done to the Dursleys, reminded him of the battle and deaths he had witnessed in the caves.

"Hey," Draco said softly as Shadow pulled away to sit up straight. He gently brushed curls away from Shadow's eyes and wiped gently at the tear tracks left on the teen's pale cheeks. Shadow unconsciously leaned into his hand. "It's okay."

Shadow smiled, aware of how ridiculous he was being. He stood and went to his dresser, pulling out a pair of pajamas.

"I'll be right back," Draco said and left the room. He went to the end of the hall where there was a bathroom. He wet a cloth and brought it back.

The piano was gone, back around his friend's neck. Shadow was sitting on the side of the bed in his pajamas, just staring out at the water scene beyond the window. Draco crouched in front of him and handed him the wet cloth.

"Thanks," Shadow said hoarsely. It was cool against his skin and erased the sticky residue of sweat and tears. He sighed as it gave him some sense of relief, made him feel more in control. He looked down at the blond who was still crouched and looking up at him. He was frowning in worry, watching him carefully. Shadow laughed softly, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"You okay?" Draco asked. He took back the cloth and set it on the nightstand.

"I'm fine," Shadow promised. He lay down and closed his eyes.

Draco stood and watched him for a minute. He did look tired. Sighing, Draco decided to let it go, but he was going to press the issue in the morning. He wasn't about to let Shadow keep whatever happened a secret. He was halfway to the door when Shadow spoke.

"Serpentine."

He stopped and looked back.
Shadow turned his head and opened his eyes, revealing the open vulnerability in them. "Stay?"

"Sure," Draco answered tightly around the lump in his throat.

He kicked off his shoes and socks and slowly took off his button-down shirt and slacks, folding them and placing them on the dresser. He borrowed one of Shadow's overly large soft-cotton T-shirts and left his boxers on. He got into bed and slipped under the covers.

Shadow moved to copy him. The lay silently for several minutes, but Draco couldn't sleep. He listened to his friend's even breathing. It was a familiar sound from his time at Grimmauld Place, and it usually put him right to sleep, but not tonight. Draco turned sideways and propped his head up on his hand. He looked down at Shadow's face in the soft green light.

He was sound asleep, one hand up by his ear, the fingers curled loosely toward his palm. The arms was draped over his thin stomach. As he watched, Shadow sighed and rolled onto his side, facing Draco and curling his legs up toward his chest. Draco smiled. Shadow was such a restless sleeper, but fortunately it didn't look like he was having bad dreams.

Sighing, he reached out and brushed the tips of his fingers along Shadow's cheek before laying back down and finally closing his eyes. He didn't see the small frown lines on Shadow's brow smooth out at his touch or notice that Shadow's breathing got deeper as he slipped into an even more restful sleep.

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"Get up, Draco," Shadow called, shaking the blond's thigh.

Draco opened his eyes and blinked at the bright morning light that flooded the room. He sat up with a yawn to find Shadow dressed and pulling on his shoes. "Where are you going?"

"Breakfast." The duel-colored eyes sparkled at him. "Then we're going to meet the twins and Nev to plan the first few pranks against Umbitch. You interested?"

Draco smirked. "Of course." He threw aside the blankets and stood. Shadow tossed him his clothes and he caught them. "I can't wear these to breakfast. I'm going to stop by my room and get cleaned up."

Shadow rolled his eyes. "It's not like they're dirty. We can use magic."

"Still." He wrinkled his nose.

"Hurry up, then."

Shadow waited impatiently as Draco dressed in fresh clothes and washed up. Breakfast was quiet, most of the students in the school deciding to sleep in on Sunday morning. Shadow didn't have that luxury. He had a busy day planned. Luckily, his friends didn't complain.

He and Draco made their way to an abandoned classroom on the fifth floor to find the twins and Neville already there and talking quietly.

"Morning!" the twins chirped. "How are you this fine day?"

"I'll be better when we have a solid plan of revenge," Shadow admitted, grinning evilly.

"You never said what happened," Draco murmured quietly. He didn't want to bring up the issue in
front of the others, in case Shadow didn't want to talk about it to anyone else.

"She had me write a research essay," Shadow answered flatly. "Come on."

He pulled Draco further into the room. Neville made room for them around the old teacher's desk where the twins had ideas and various ingredients and tools spread out before them. They launched immediately into suggestions and plans. Draco helped add malicious little details to up the humiliating factor. Shadow added his own creative advice, but at the same time insisted that the pranks could NOT be linked back to him in anyway. Neville was mostly there to keep the twins under control and point out ways they could get caught or blamed for the pranks.

"It would help if we didn't target just her," he piped up. "The first one could involve all the new teachers: Umbridge, Krum, and Remus. The second could involve all the female teachers, stuff like that."


The twins nodded solemnly and Fred said, "We're hoping our reputations will shield him."

"If not," George said with uncharacteristic hardness. "We'll confess or sign our names or something."

"What happened in your detention?" Neville asked softly, perceptive as always. "I thought you were going to leave this up to the twins and not get involved yet, but you wrote me this morning to get them and meet you here. You said you changed your mind and wanted to help."

All eyes turned toward him and Shadow clenched his fists, ducking his head so his curls hid his expression of cold anger. "Let's just say… Umbitch took it too far."

"Shadow?" the twins asked, frowning, but it was to Draco that Shadow looked to, peaking out from around his ebony hair. Grey eyes rested on him levelly. He knew Draco was going to weasel out information eventually. He sighed and straightened.

"She gave me books to study and ordered me to write an essay. They described in detail the Ministry's power over criminals and rebels."

George cringed dramatically. "Ah, that's awful, mate."

"Homework and reading, there's nothing worse," Fred agreed with a gasp of horror.

Draco spun, wand in hand, and glared at them with violent fury. He vividly recalled Shadow's condition last night and it was nothing to laugh over.

Neville's eyes got wide, certain the blond Slytherin was going to curse them, but Shadow merely reached out and rested his hand on Draco's shoulder. He could see the suspicion and worry in the twins eyes and knew they were just trying to lighten the mood.

"It wasn't just the books as you well know. She picked those particular texts to make it perfectly clear to me what would she could have happen to my father." His hand tightened unconsciously on Draco's shoulder, making the blond wince. Shadow stared down at the papers, his eyes gone completely cold. "Let's just say I don't take to threats well."

Neville shivered. He looked to the twins for help, but the redheads were staring at Draco, strange looks on their faces. Neville sighed and reached out for his brother's arm. He shook it lightly. "Shadow," he called reprovingly.
The teen blinked and looked up at him, humanity come back into his eyes.

"What, Longbottom?" Draco snapped. "He has every right to be pissed."

"Yes, but not at that cost," Neville argued. He suddenly remembered the caves and the Death Eater his brother had torn into to get information. A lot of horrible things had happened, but he was worried his brother wouldn't come back from the edge if he jumped off too many times.

Shadow met Neville's eyes. "No. My brother's right. It does no good to dwell on how I feel about the Umbitch." He looked to Draco and asked, "What time is it?"

"Ten minutes until lunch," the blond answered reluctantly after casting Tempus. "We've been at it for almost four hours."

Shadow nodded. He looked to the twins. They had been whispering to each other for the past few minutes. He raised an eyebrow but decided not to ask. He most likely wouldn't want to hear the answer. "You guys okay with setting this up?"

"Yeah." George broke away from his brother to salute. "You can count on us, Captain!"

"We will have that witch running screaming from this castle!" Fred proclaimed grandly.

"Or our name isn't the Impossible Duo!"

"The Terrible Twins!"

"Prank Masters of our generation!"

Shadow laughed and smiled ruefully. "Don't know what I was thinking. Be careful."

"Careful?" Fred wrinkled his nose and looked at his twin.

"Don't know, mate," George answered with a cheery shrug.

Draco sneered at the two maniacs and followed a laughing Shadow from the room. He was glad his friend was feeling better, but he didn't know how Shadow could put up with Gryffindors without going mad. Draco had pulled his wand no less than three times. He caught up with Shadow and put his hands in his pockets. Shadow cast him a sideways glance, revealing his blue eye. The look was far too amused to suit Draco and he scowled.

"What are your plans after lunch?" the curly-haired teen asked innocently.

Draco scowled harder but answered. "I'm helping Crabbe and Goyle with some homework. Blaise and Pansy might stop by to assist."

"I'll be in my father's quarters until dinner. Come by if you have time."

"For any particular reason or do you just want my charming company?" Draco smirked, his posture relaxing for the first time that morning. His grey eyes sparkled in the light and his face softened to look almost young.

Shadow pushed him playfully. "Egotistical much?"

"Hardly," Draco sniffed. "I'm just a realist."

"A realist, huh?" Shadow laughed. "That's rich coming from the guy who insists that he can beat
Severus at chess and yet hasn't even come close."

"I've come close!" Draco protested. He took a swipe at his friend's shoulder, but Shadow just danced away. Growling, he gave chase, the brunet's laughter filling the hallway as the two boys ran to the Great Hall.

Chapter end.
Shadow sat up to his neck in warm bath water. It was filled with healing solution for his wounds. Hopefully he wouldn't have to do this much longer. The many scars on his body were rapidly shrinking every week with every soak. They had gone from being ragged and blood-red to slightly raised, pink lines. He lifted his arm. Through the steam he saw that the long scar running the length of his forearm was now thin, almost white - barely any pink left to it.

He sighed and sunk back into the water. Severus had instructed him to think about relationships while soaking. They would talk about it when he was done. Shadow had been thinking about it, but his thoughts kept drifting to other things. Like the war and what he was going to do about the need for Harry Potter.

"Shadow?" Severus poked his head into the bathroom. "It's been an hour."

The teen gratefully climbed out of the bath. Warm fluffy towels waited for him and he gently patted himself dry. All the scars scattered around his body looked like the one on his arm. Pleased, he grabbed his clothes and got dressed.

Severus was waiting for him at the chess board. Shadow took a seat across from him, his damp hair curling into his face and dripping down his neck. He moved a pawn forward with a soft click.

"Did you think about relationships?" Severus asked casually, moving one of his own pawns out.

Shadow rolled his eyes. Of course he had, he just didn't want to talk about it. Not that Severus was going to let him get away with it. He stared thoughtfully at the board and moved his knight. "It doesn't really bother me. I mean, relationships are fine. They make people happy, so whatever."

"I see," Severus murmured. They sat silently as Severus considered his next move. His bishop advanced. "Have you considered a relationship for yourself?"

Shadow frowned. "Not really. It's not something that really appeals to me."

Severus said nothing, waiting for Shadow's next move. It took several moments and, in the end, he moved another pawn. "What exactly is unappealing? You just remarked that relationships bring happiness."

"It's not the only thing that does," Shadow sneered as Severus moved his knight further onto the board.

They sat silently for several minutes. The only sound the click of the pieces. Shadow squirmed internally. His response seemed clever and solid, but as his words hung in the air they seemed childish and ignorant. He thought of the joy Severus felt with Amalia. The happiness that Neville felt around Ginny. Being empathetic, it was kind of ridiculous to claim that that kind of happiness equaled the lesser everyday brand of happiness.

"Do you think so?" Severus finally asked.

Shadow winced. "Relationships seem to grant a type of happiness that is more fulfilling than others, but... It's not necessary to have that kind of happiness to have a good life is what I mean."
"So love is nice but unnecessary?" Severus asked mildly.

"I guess," Shadow flushed. It sounded silly said like that. He bit his lip as Severus took his rook.

"Therefore those with love are lucky to have something so nice beyond what is necessary to survive. Would you feel lucky if you were to fall in love or if someone came to you and confessed falling in love with you?"

Cold sweat broke out on his face. "No," Shadow answered reluctantly. "I wouldn't feel lucky if that happened."

"Why?"

"I just don't want it. It's pointless."

Severus smirked at the contradiction. "You admitted love gives a deeper and more fulfilled happiness than one would otherwise experience."

"It's not that I don't like love, it's more that…" Shadow clutched his queen in his fist. "I just… don't want it," he finished weakly.

"Why?" Severus pressed, dark eyes glinting.

"I just don't. It's a hassle," Shadow snapped. He slammed his queen down, taking Severus's bishop.

"How so?" Severus asked patiently.

Shadow didn't have answer. He shook his head fitfully.

"Think about it for next time," Severus allowed. "Check mate."

Sighing, Shadow sat back in the chair with a frown. "Fine." He sat up and roughly rubbed at his face. "I need to talk to you about some other stuff if my session is over."

"It is," Severus crossed his legs and arms, obviously unhappy with the topic. "And your idea to address this problem?"

"I don't want to be Harry Potter. I only just became Shadow Snape and I like it. It feels right. This is who I am now, but I was thinking we could have Harry Potter write a few letters assuring the Order and his friends that he's fine. Maybe he has been recovering all this time, and wherever he is, he's decided to stay for secret training."

"That has merit," Severus replied, intrigued. "We'd have to think of a location that Minerva and the Order will not be able to breach to discover the lie."

"Are there places like that?"
"Of course. Africa is very insular, as well as China. Let me make a few inquires."

"Let me know and I'll write the letter," Shadow agreed. Now came the hard part. "One more thing. You see, I was wondering if the dreams of wanting to let Demon Out were actually coming from Voldemort. I thought he was dead, but if he's not then…” he shrugged helplessly.

"What do you mean?" Severus snapped. Fingers tight on his thighs.

Shadow explained the visions that he had all last year concerning conversations between Wormtail and the Dark Lord and the murder of Bertha Jenkins. Severus sat rigid, shocked that his son hadn't mentioned something of this magnitude before. It was undeniable if what he was hearing was correct. Shadow had a connection to the Dark Lord.

"We will have to experiment. I've never heard of anything quite like that." Severus finally spoke.

Shadow nodded. "Okay."

"Come." He stood. It was hard to get his mind back on the present when given such extraordinary information, but he didn't intend to neglect his son's health either. "I planned on dueling for two hours or so. You could use the training and it should help relieve stress."

The teen got eagerly to his feet. A duel sounded perfect right now.

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Monday morning the Great Hall was filled with the gentle murmur of sleepy voices. The teachers sat at the staff table sipping coffee, reading the morning paper, or talking about the dreary rainy weather. In other words, it was utterly normal. Until, of course, hand-sized fish splashed up from the water pitchers.

The beautiful koi sparkled with reflective light and swam through the air until they were circling the heads of Professors Umbridge, Krum, and Lupin. There were gasps and cries of appreciation as watery fins flashed playfully and there were laughs as the fish gave sassy flips at Flitwick and the Headmistress when they tried to banish them. Finally, there were cheers as Lupin stroked his fish, making it cuddle up against his cheek.

"How strange," Umbridge told McGonagall sweetly as the older woman continually failed to discharge the fish made of water. "You'd think that the Headmistress, at least, would be able to discharge a student's magic."

"This is really quite a masterpiece," Flitwick cut in, studying the charms work more than actively trying to counter it. "I couldn't have done better myself! Look at how tightly the cooperating spells are woven. You can hardly tell that there are half a dozen spells at work instead of just one. Brilliant! Just brilliant!"

"It's a harmless prank, Dolores." McGonagall smiled at the annoyed woman. "I suggest we let it play its course. I believe the students are just trying to welcome the new teachers."

Umbridge watched the fish swimming around her and nodded her head. "Very well." Standing, she waved out at the students with a beatific smile. The gesture was met with renewed laughs and claps. "I hope you don't mind if I make a few inquires myself?"

"Go right ahead, Dolores," McGonagall answered, a hint of amusement.

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Septima walked into Ancient Runes silently. Her hazel eyes scanned the room. There were nine students, all Third-years except for Shadow Snape whom she had come to see. It wasn't hard to find the boy. He was different from his peers. It was in his body language and his strange eyes. A maturity and an intensity that even the older students didn't have.

"Professor Vector?" Professor Gorgon asked softly. The man was almost seventy years old and a scholar through and through. He loved his books and ancient scrolls. Thin because he often forgot meals. Silver hair like a lion's mane because he forgot to brush it. Brown eyes bright with knowledge and enthusiasm for his subject. Only teaching could bring him out of his research.

"May I have a word with Mr. Snape, please, Professor Gorgon?" Septima asked with a warm smile.

"Of course. Certainly." He waved absently at the class, not sure which of the students she was asking for.

All eyes turned to the single fourteen-year-old in the class. Shadow met her gaze. It was hard to read any emotion in it. Whether or not it was because one eye was a pale lime green and the other was a summer-sky blue was uncertain. He evaluated her expression and stance for a handful of seconds before acknowledging the summons.

"Do I need my things, Deputy Headmistress?" he asked politely.

"No. I just need a quick word." Septima smiled at him. Despite the mystery surrounding the teen, she could see why Minerva was so attached. The boy was needy in an indefinable way. It called to her maternal instincts.

They stepped out into the corridor and she smiled with bemusement at the way he leaned against the wall, hands casually in his pockets. He reminded her forcefully of Severus in the Potion Master's more relaxed moments. She had worked with Severus for over a decade and had been just as shocked as the rest of the staff to learn he had a child.

She really couldn't imagine the side of Severus Snape that Shadow must know intimately. It made her curious and also regretful. Severus was a good colleague. She would have liked to know the more human side of him. They may have been friends instead of simple acquaintances if she had.

"You wanted to speak to me?" Shadow prompted.

"Yes. Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts." Septima shifted so she could feel the reassuring weight of the long braid down her back. It was a habit she had from childhood. At least she didn't tug on it or twist it anymore, she thought wryly. "I'm not as bad as Professor Gorgon, but I've been known to drift away a time or two."

He smiled back at her, but it was still guarded. "Am I in trouble?"

"No," she assured him. "I've actually come on the behest of the Headmistress. She wishes to inform you that she is aware of Professor Umbridge's prejudice against your last name. She's keeping an eye out, but she can't do much at the moment. She asks that you step carefully around the woman until her power wanes."

Shadow nodded, his face still bland.

Septima smiled, certain this last message would get some kind of reaction. "If Umbridge crosses the line, the Headmistress wants you to come to her or go to your father immediately. She is trusting to your Slytherin nature to know when that is. Also, she wants to applaud your use of the Terrible Twins' creativity. It's about time they were good for something."
The teen laughed. His barriers came down just a bit and she saw the child in him. It was a surprisingly refreshing sight.

"Are we in accord?" she offered her hand.

"Yes, I believe we are, Professor Vector." Shadow grinned, shaking her hand in agreement.

"Good. Back to class with you, then." She gestured to the door and he went with another soft laugh.

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Umbridge was having a bad day. A very bad day. First at breakfast that damn fish came out of the pitcher and has been following her ever since. This was her first week teaching. She wanted to make the right impression, open yet firm, but it was hard to maintain when all during class the students were grinning and watching that Damn FISH!

She tried to run away from it when the halls were empty, but the blasted thing kept up easily. She couldn't trick it to hover around someone else and she couldn't use her office because all her precious kittens went berserk at the sight of the fish. They yowled and tried to get out of their pictures to attack the thing. The fish didn't help, flashing its fins and swimming close to tease them.

Flustered but fighting hard not to show it, Umbridge walked into the Great Hall for dinner. She took her seat next to the Headmistress, pointedly ignoring the abominable thing swimming around her head. It was beginning to make her dizzy. The students weren't staring at it anymore, at least. They were all used to the sight now, she imagined.

"Any leads on who the prankster is, Dolores?" McGonagall asked as she sipped her tea.

"Not yet, Headmistress." Umbridge smiled, but inside she was far from happy.

She knew they knew. Everyone knew who did this. She had her suspicions - she glared over at the curly-haired boy at the Slytherin table - but no one was coming forward. Even the receptive students she had sounded out wouldn't say anything. They were waiting to see how she dealt with it, she supposed. Her eyes narrowed and she reached for her drink.

Suddenly and without warning, all the liquid on the staff table exploded from their places and headed straight for the three water-creatures floating around the new professors. Umbridge let out a high-pitched shriek as the fish turned into a life-sized great white shark. With a powerful thrust, it opened its great jaws and bit the woman in half. Or it would have if it had been real. Instead, Umbridge was left dripping wet from a dozen different beverages, some even sticky.

Krum leapt agilely from his chair and brandished his wand, shooting off a defensive spell, but that didn't stop the large octopus from wrapping its tentacles around him and sucking at his face before disintegrating, soaking him, too. As impressive as that was, Lupin's was even better.

The werewolf closed his eyes in resignation, not even trying to stop the inevitable, so he didn't see as his fish morphed into a beautiful, topless mermaid that had the boys sitting closest to him hooting and catcalling. The mermaid smiled and stroked Lupin's cheek suggestively before wrapping her arms around him and dissolving with a splash, soaking the History professor.

The Great Hall erupted in hysterics.

Umbridge jumped to her feet. She was panting she was so furious, but she tried to keep her smile in place. "Very clever, but pranks are highly irresponsible. They are disruptive and offensive. I do believe students of Hogwarts should behave with the dignity befitting this fine establishment, do you
"Pranks in the classroom are disruptive," McGonagall agreed smoothly. "And I disapprove of the evolution of Professor Lupin's fish. There are eleven-year-olds present. However, as this is dinner, I see no reason to overreact. We are in charge of a school, after all, and they are only children."

Umbridge smiled, accepting the challenge. She had tried to give the woman a chance, but obviously Minerva McGonagall had chosen her side and it was not with the Ministry. Nodding, satisfied with that cleared up, she tried to cast a drying charm. It didn't work. Blushing with embarrassment, she gathered her soaked robes around her and squished out of the Great Hall much to the amusement of the students. Krum and Lupin followed. The former scowling hotly at everyone and the later smiling with warm cheeks.

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Tuesday all anyone could talk about was the prank. There were whispers about how a second year going to the bathroom had seen her running away from her fish. A seventh year who wanted to ask her about the reading assignment saw her trying to bat the fish away from the kitten pictures on her office wall and yelling threats. She was definitely made the fool of the week!

And there was no doubt who was behind it. It had spread like wildfire that the twins had it out for Umbridge. No one came forward and told the woman that, however. Everyone knew that to do so would only make them a target as well, and no one was quite that stupid. It was also noted in whispers and glances that Professor McGonagall hadn't really protested. The Headmistress was known to be anti-pranks, so it was curious that she didn't seem to mind.

The Slytherins felt the political tension and speculated on it. Was McGonagall just trying to find a new way now that she was Headmistress or was her attitude due to her taking a subtle stance against Umbridge and in extension the Ministry? They also wondered if the twins were the sole masterminds behind the prank. Usually the twins were flashy and loud. The fish were flashy, but there was a Slytherin air about them that had never been a part of the twins pranks before.

"I think Shadow helped them," Seventh-year Adrian Pucey murmured. "The twins took to him, didn't they? And Shadow got in trouble because of them. They might feel like they owe him a chance at revenge."

"Did you see him come back from detention?" Daphne Greengrass agreed. "He was really upset."

"Probably just wants attention," Pansy sniffed.

"And he got it, didn't he?" Fourth-year Lenora Selwyn sneered. "Malfoy ran right up after him."

"He didn't come back down later that night, either," Theodore Knott said slowly. "I wonder what that means."

"They're awfully buddy-buddy," Sixth-year Terence Higgs growled. "Never would have guessed Draco would end up like this."

Looks were passed around the large group. Because none of them could ever imagine Draco Malfoy of all people doing anything unless he was getting something out of it. From what they could see, abandoning the principles and honor of a Pureblood, turning his back on his father and family name, and publicly siding with a known traitor and his family when the strongest Dark Lord to rise in centuries was after said family, didn't seem very advantageous.

The speculation increased when in DADA that day Umbridge questioned Shadow with silky threats
as to the identity of the prankster, but the curly-haired teen turned her aside with big, innocent eyes.
None of the other Slytherins bought the expression even though it sent Umbridge back to her desk
unsatisfied. A Snape would never wear it unless he was lying through his teeth.

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Severus answered his door and nodded when he saw his son on the other side. He had time to
consider the implications of the connection Shadow had with the Dark Lord. Had time to cool his
outrage that Shadow had kept it from him for so long. He felt he could address the situation
reasonably, but still a kernel of frustration and fear could be heard in his voice.

"I asked you to come early to discuss a few things with you."

Shadow nodded and took a seat on the couch. He was resigned. He had expected some kind of
reaction and was impressed Severus had controlled his temper as well as he had. Expecting some
kind of reprimand, he hadn't changed out of his school uniform even though dinner was over. He felt
more protected in the soft black robes and green tie.

Severus strode over. His pale features kept twitching out of the perfect bland mask he was trying to
conform his expression to. "Why didn't you tell me sooner about the visions?"

"Partly because at the time I had divided feelings about you," Shadow replied reasonably. He looked
up at his father, his new features a subtle reflection of the man before him, his dual-colored eyes
reminding Severus painfully of his mother.

The Potion Master had to strain to keep from losing his temper. "And after? When you feelings
pertaining to me were reconciled?" he sneered, his mouth an ugly line slashed across his face. "I find
it ironic that you demand complete and total honesty and react to withheld information with a sense
of betrayal. In that sense, I am perfectly in my right to feel as if you've betrayed me by keeping this to
yourself, you realize."

Shadow shrugged, a slight shifting of his weight revealing his own discomfort. "Look. By that point
I was much better at Occlumency and I wasn't having them anymore. And even if I did, I thought
they could be useful. I knew you'd want to shut them off and…"

"Of course I want to 'shut them off', as you so eloquently put it!" Severus finally exploded. "Have
you considered the fact that connections go both ways? The Dark Lord has equal access to your
mind that you do of his, you reckless child! Who knows what you've unwittingly revealed!"

"What do you want me to do?" Shadow demanded, jumping to his feet and standing his ground.
"Occlumency doesn't work all the way! I do not slack in my mental defenses! I didn't do this on
purpose!"

"That is some reassurance at least, that you are not courting this bond," Severus allowed and backed
off, physically and mentally. He went to the fireplace and poured a small snifter of brandy. He turned
to face his son. Shadow had returned to his seat at least. "I want Salazar to examine this connection. I
won't know what steps to take until I fully understand the nature of what we are dealing with."

Shadow scowled. A refusal was on the tip of his tongue. He knew very well that Salazar was eager
to get his phantom hands on his psyche. The Hogwarts founder that Shadow was the perfect
specimen of complex psychology to examine, but his father and Draco were right. Something had to
be done about the mental connection to Voldemort. Especially now that they had such vital
information to keep absolutely secret.
"Fine," he answered tightly, eyes practically shimmering with anger at the situation. "But if he fucks around…"

"I will not allow that," Severus promised, matching his son's expression.

The moment was interrupted by a knock on the door. Severus went to open it. It was Neville and, within half an hour, everyone who was invited had arrived. Sirius was the last to come.

Severus pulled him in and quickly slammed his door shut again. The man looked around the room. Remus and Neville were on one couch. Shadow and Draco were sitting across from them, and there were two arm chairs at each end completing the circle. Sirius sighed. He had obviously been asked to come to hear bad news.

"What is it?" he demanded. He ran his eyes quickly over Shadow. The teen looked fine. Better in fact than when he left for school. Sirius ran his eyes over everyone else. They all looked fine, tense but okay. "What's happened?"

"Well, I have information that you all need to hear," Shadow said and gestured for Sirius to sit down. He did so reluctantly. He didn't like to be pinned down. He needed the room to pace. Especially for bad news. "Just tell me already," he bit out impatiently and tugged at his shoulder-length hair.

"Yes," Draco piped up. "Tell us. We've been waiting forever already."

"Well, sorry! I had to track something down and I couldn't just run over here…" Sirius glared.

"It's alright, Siri," Remus soothed. He quelled the blond with a glance. "Let's just listen for now, okay?"

Sirius muttered but obediently turned his attention to Shadow like everyone else. What he heard blew him away. He was so shocked he couldn't even react for a second. Finally, he jumped to his feet. "WHAT? How could he… His soul… Is that even… But what does that mean?" he demanded, looking between Shadow and Snape.

"It means that in order to get rid of the Dark Lord permanently," Severus answered darkly. "We must first extinguish all six Horcruxes. One of which, Shadow destroyed in second year in the form of the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle's diary."

Sirius and Remus were speechless. What Shadow was describing was of the Darkest Arts. So Dark they weren't even sure it was possible, but the disbelief faded as fast as it was born. They knew Voldemort was capable of the most horrific things. Why should this be any different?

Draco was handling things much worse. He was still as a statue and just as pale. His long fingers were clenched in his lap to hide their shaking. He knew the Dark Lord was powerful and skilled in the Dark Arts, but he was still human. Still Pureblood. He had been shocked to discover through Shadow's letters that the Dark Lord was just a Half-blood with delusions of grandeur. But still, the Dark Lord was powerful and dangerous, so it didn't really disturb him as this new realization did.

When Shadow told him about Dumbledore's Pensieve, he hadn't mentioned anything about Horcruxes. Just that the Dark Lord had protections that allowed him to be resurrected, protections that needed to be dismantled. What Shadow was describing… It wasn't human. No human could do that and survive. It was… monstrous. And only a monster would do so. So now the face of the enemy wasn't an insane, powerful wizard. It was the face of an evil, powerful monster. And somehow that made the Dark Lord seem ten times worse than Draco already thought he was.
The fear came and went over the summer. The magnitude of his position, of the consequences of defying - betraying - his father and the Dark Lord snuck up on him sometimes when he least expected it, but for the first time Draco felt true terror. He realized with sudden awful clarity what would happen to him should he be captured. And that didn't even compare to what would happen to Shadow, to what had already happened to Shadow. Suddenly, the picture of what the Dark Lord would do to the world, what they were facing, was devastating.

Draco bit his lip hard and applied all of his will to keeping his expression blank in front of the others. He was a Slytherin and he was a Malfoy. He would not show his sudden doubt.

"How do we kill Horcruxes?" Neville asked quietly, his brown eyes steady as he met Shadow's gaze. He was as pale as Draco, but he had more time to consider the idea and become determined to do anything he could to destroy the monster that had killed and would continue to kill so many people; do anything to stop the true monster who had hurt his mom and dad. He would not back down.

"Horcruxes are pretty much indestructible," Shadow admitted. He tilted his head toward the blond and gave him a conspiratorial smile, hoping Draco wasn't mad about not telling him everything sooner. "But basilisk venom is corrosive enough to do the trick."

Draco didn't engage. He couldn't allow himself any reaction, for fear of falling apart.

Shadow winced slightly at the non-reaction.

"So You-Know-Who isn't dead. He's really back and he'll keep coming back," Sirius whispered. He stared down at his hands, surprised to see them trembling. Making fists, he met the eyes of his godson. "What do you need us to do?"

"Well, because Voldemort…"

"Do Not Say His Name," Severus snapped, eyes flashing.

Shadow just stared at him.

"I thought he was gone," Severus grated. "That is why I allowed it before, but not any longer."

"Why?" Shadow frowned and crossed his arms. "What does it matter?"

"Names have power," Remus explained. "When you speak someone's name, especially in the company of something or someone that person has a magical connection to, it can get that person's attention."

Shadow realized that even Sirius seemed solemn and in agreement. Sighing, he backed down. "Fine, but I'm not saying that ridiculous You-Know-Who crap. I'll call him Tom from now on."

Draco choked, eyes wide. Even Severus looked appalled.

Sirius threw his head back and gave a barking laugh. The tension left his shoulders and arms as he grinned at his godson. "I can live with that," he chuckled.

"As I was saying," Shadow smirked. "Since Tom is really back, Harry Potter is needed to reassure everyone. Not that they should use a teenager to make themselves feel better - they should fight to protect their own selves - but I'm going to need help and having people panic or flee in terror won't help very much."
"What kind of help?" Remus questioned. "Is there anything we can do?"

"I don't know what or where the other Horcruxes are," Shadow sighed. "The memory Dumbledore left me said that he'd give me clues 'when I'm ready'. I don't know when that will be or if he even had time before he died to arrange those clues. So I need help looking for the damn things."

"They will be objects that hold sentimental value to the Dark Lord," Severus explained. He came forward and handed Sirius a rolled up parchment. "I've written down all the items that I recall the Dark Lord has mentioned as precious or put effort into protecting. Most have been scattered since his first fall. If you could find out about any of these, it would be a start."

"How will I know if one is a Horcrux if I find it?" Sirius frowned, but took the parchment. "And if it is one, will it harm me?"

"If you keep it near you for too long, it can be harmful to your state of mind." Severus crossed his arms and sneered down his nose at his childhood enemy. "I am certain that even you would be wise enough to secure such an item as quickly as possible and not dally."

"Oh put a sock in it, Snivellus," Sirius scowled. The only thing keeping him in his seat was Remus' firm grip holding him down.

"What about Harry Potter," the werewolf prodded. "You were telling us about a plan?"

"I'm going to write Sirius, Nev, Ron, and Hermione letters as Harry Potter. Telling you all that I was transported to a Buddhist healing temple, Vishnu's temple to be exact, in China. Basically, I've decided to stay there for further training. There will be obvious warnings about Voldemort being back and Severus is going to help me concoct a story about what happened in the graveyard. I want you, Sirius, to give your copy to McGonagall to give her and the Order hope just incase Ron and Hermione don't share theirs. The Order knows the prophecy so they are especially in need of reassurance that their one true hope isn't dead."

"You know the Prophecy?" Sirius gapped. He glared at Severus accusingly. "You told him? Don't you think he has enough to worry about without adding that crap?"

Remus looked imploringly at the teen. "Don't take it too literally, Shadow. You certainly shouldn't be planning on confronting You-Know-Who on your own. The future is fluid and can't really be predicted accurately."

"I don't plan on doing anything so heroic," Shadow assured him with a teasing grin. "I plan on getting as much help from you guys as I can."

"Good," Sirius said roughly, sudden tears in his eyes. He hugged the teen tightly. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I don't plan on going anywhere," Shadow said dryly as he slipped out of his godfather's grip.

"I must bind you all. This information is highly sensitive. No one can learn of it for fear the Dark Lord will hear rumors and move to safeguard the Horcruxes more than they already are. The only chance we have is for him to remain in complete ignorance," Severus told them seriously, his black eyes piercing them. "Agreed?"

They all nodded. The six of them had just promised themselves to this quest. It was a heavy burden for all of them.

"It's late," Draco finally spoke up. He avoided their eyes. "Class tomorrow."
"Goodnight, Draco," Remus smiled with understanding.

The blond slipped out of the room without another word.

xXxXx

Shadow tried to talk to Draco later, but he had his bedroom door firmly locked and wasn't answering it. The persistent knocking roused the other Fifth-year Slytherin boys. Blaise watched with a blank expression, Crabbe and Goyle looked suspicious, and Theodore had worn a dark sneer. Shadow left the door alone after that.

The blond avoided him all Thursday, as well. Bothered but unable to do anything about it, Shadow returned his attention to slowly befriending Rogan and his group. At least he wasn't the only one who had problems, even if he didn't know it.

An hour past curfew, Ron was sneaking back to the common room when heard quick footsteps behind him. Heart pounding in his chest, he dove for a statue and tried to hide his lanky body behind it, praying with all his might that it wasn't Filch or that awful Umbridge lady. Hermione already had detention with the woman all week for questioning the syllabus and arguing about what the book they were assigned said. He didn't even want to imagine what Umbridge would do to a student out after curfew.

"Hermione!" Ron whispered, shocked when the footsteps were those of his friend.

"Ron!" she cried, jumping back in fright. "What are you doing back there?"

"Making rounds. I am a Prefect." Ron frowned, coming out from behind the statue. "What are you doing?"

"I'm a Prefect as well as you," Hermione huffed, rolling her eyes. "And we don't have duties tonight. It's the Slytherin's turn to patrol for students breaking curfew."

"So what were you doing then?" Ron pressed as they continued on to the Tower. "And why are you holding your hand like that?"

"Writer's cramp," she said quickly.

Umbridge had forced her to use a Blood Quill for lines all week. She had been appalled and promised to tell the Headmistress, but Umbridge had explained that blood was a powerful tool. With Hermione's, she could charm the Gryffindor girl into silence and glamour the wound so no one except for them could see it. Hermione was trapped, but she refused to back down. Realizing that Ron was looking at her strangely, she quickly threw his question back at him.

"What are you doing out past curfew?"

They both stood nervously and avoided each other's eyes. They had just reached the portrait of the Fat Lady when Ron began to laugh. Hermione looked at him like he was crazy before breaking down into a smile of her own.

"It's stupid, isn't it? I mean, we're best friends," he laughed. "I was... Well, I've been practicing on my broom all week as much as I can. Quidditch try-outs are Friday and I was hoping to make it on the team this year."

"Oh, Ron, I'm sure you'll do fine," Hermione enthused, putting a hand on his arm. Although the mention of the Quidditch team made a pang go through her heart... Harry... How she missed him.
Ron smiled, flushed with pleasure at her confidence in him. "I hope so… What about you? What are you doing out so late?"

"I…" She fidgeted with her sleeves for a second before straightening, her cheeks glowing red. "If you must know, I was talking with Viktor." She had needed him after the torture that was detention with Umbridge. Viktor made her feel better, even without knowing what was wrong. A smile brushed her lips.

Ron's blush tripled. "Oh… ah… I see…" Embarrassed beyond belief, he pushed open the portrait and hurried through.

"Oh, honestly! It's not like that. We were just talking!" Hermione insisted, red in the face as she followed her best friend.

They both came to a dead stop when the saw Neville waiting in the common room for them, a snowy owl sitting on the couch back beside his head.

"I've been waiting for you two," Neville told them. He was beaming and almost fell over his own feet in his haste to stand and meet them at the portrait hole. "Harry wrote us letters! Here!"

Numbly, Hermione reached for the thick envelope. It read: To Hermione and Ron. "Oh my god," she breathed and quickly tore it open. Ron was practically pressed at her side, reading over her shoulder. Distantly, Hermione noted that the handwriting did look like Harry's.

**Dear Hermione and Ron,**

*I'm sorry I haven't written sooner. I know you must be worried about me a lot. I was hurt, but don't worry. I'm getting much better. I didn't really feel strong enough to write this until now. Don't be mad. Let me explain. What happened after the last Task was awful. I still don't really want to write it down, but I know I have to. It's been long enough.*

*I got through the maze, not really sure how I did that, but in the end it was just me and Cedric. We went after the Cup together. I got to the finish just after him. I told him to take the Cup and he did. It was sitting on a pedestal and was this big golden trophy. I expected fireworks to go off when he took it, but nothing happened.*

*I was looking around, so I don't really know what happened. Cedric just grabbed me all of a sudden and we were portkeyed away. We landed in a graveyard. It was old and dark. I can't describe how scary it was. You'd have to have been there. I'm glad you weren't, though. Wormtail was there. He came out of the darkness and killed Cedric with a Killing Curse without warning. Just BAM. There was no time to stop it. I'm sorry. It was my fault. They only wanted me and Cedric got in the way. He's dead because of me.*

*I just stared at him and then Wormtail was grabbing me and dragging me over to a headstone. He tied me up and there was this huge cauldron with this awful smelling potion in it. He started chanting and stuff. I'm not sure what all he said. I was looking around, but then he said 'flesh of a servant willingly given' and he cut off his own right hand! Chopped it off and let it fall into the potion. Then he came over to me. He was crazy, guys. I can't tell you. I thought he was going to kill me! But he said, 'blood of the enemy forcibly taken'. He cut my wrist. He filled a cup with my blood and poured it into the potion too. Then…*  

*I can't really tell you what happened next. Let's just say Voldemort rose from that cauldron. He's back. YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE ME! Voldemort is alive and back again. He summoned his Death Eaters. There were at least twenty. I didn't really count, though, and all their faces were covered*
with white masks, so I didn't see who anyone was. He was mad at them for not resurrecting him sooner at first. Then he untied me and promised to kill me painfully. To prove a point, I guess.

I'm not going to lie. He hurt me pretty bad, but I somehow was able to fire off a few curses. Then we fired a spell at the same time and our wands connected. They have brother cores or something. Both have feathers from Fawkes. A huge string of light connected the tips for a moment and there was this huge explosion of magic. I thought I was going to drown in it! And it hurt really bad. I just thought with all my heart to go somewhere safe and I guess I Apparated.

I arrived at a temple of Vishnu in Macao, China. The monks here healed me. They asked why I thought I came to them instead of to friends or family. I've had a lot of time to think about it and I guess it's because I was scared to go to people I knew.

Dumbledore didn't really protect me, did he? He would send me back to the Dursleys and he should make school safe for me and he doesn't, so Hogwarts was out. Padfoot is in enough trouble without me around sick and hurt to make it worse, so I didn't go to him. I don't know Hermione's parents and I don't really want to be in the Wizarding world right now, so that ruled out the Weasleys.

Voldemort's back and everyone thinks I'm the Chosen One. I can't. I can't face him again. I know I'm a Gryffindor and I'm supposed to be brave, but Cedric was killed in a second because of me. I can't get anyone else hurt. I'm not strong enough. I'm sorry. I know that's lame. I should have gotten a hold of you sooner, but I couldn't. I didn't know what to say. Writing all this down is hard even now.

I just wanted to let you know I'm okay. I'm getting better. My wounds are almost all healed due to the monks. They promised to train me, too. I've already learned a lot about magic I never even knew. The monks say I have a destiny. That coming to them was part of my destiny. I hope you can understand. I hope you can forgive me, but I've decided to stay here for awhile to learn. I can't tell you where I am. I'm not ready to face anyone yet. But I'll write again in a couple months. Be safe.

Harry Potter

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione sobbed.

She fell to her knees and covered her face. Ron dropped next to her and firmly wrapped her in his arms. He had tears falling down his own cheeks. Hermione lifted her head and met Ron's eyes. Sobbing, laughing, she threw her arms around his neck.

"He's alive! Harry's okay!" she yelled joyfully.

Ron laughed and hugged her back. "I told you," he whispered roughly, heart pounding with emotion. "I told you the bloody prat was fine. I told you."

"We have to tell Professor McGonagall!" Hermione cried. She jumped to her feet and practically flew from the room. Ron chased after her, the letter clutched in his hand.

Neville watched the portrait hole close before wandering back to the couch. He gently stroked the snowy owl's feathers. Hedwig cooed and gently nipped his fingers. "You did good, Hedwig."

xXxXx

Ginny was thrilled when Neville told her the next morning about the letters. She read them both avidly. Grinning and laughing with Ron and Hermione. Neville smiled with them, but his happy feelings were subdued. He wished he didn't have to lie to Ginny, but he understood the need for secrecy. She wouldn't tell. He was almost certain of that. In the end, it wasn't his secret to tell, so he said nothing.
It seemed his mood swing was contagious. Ron and Hermione became equally gloomy as the day wore on. They were angry that Harry didn't write them sooner. They had been worried sick - literally - and were upset that they had no way to write Harry back since Hedwig left the night before. They wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault; they wanted him to know they were there for him. They both hated the position of helpless bystander. McGonagall hated it, as well. She had the Order looking into China. They weren't getting very far. China's magical community was extremely secretive and didn't like outsiders.

However, by late afternoon, Ron was back to feeling happy and he used his mixed emotions to help drive him during the Quidditch try-outs. He performed excellently and made Keeper. Ginny also made the team in the position of Seeker. Fred and George welcomed their siblings with back slaps and jokes.

When the twins were told about Harry's letter, they had shrugged and said, 'I bet he's learning to talk funny.' It was such a typical remark from them that no one noticed the sly looks Fred and George shared behind their backs.

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Saturday night, Draco lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep. Sighing, he got up and slipped silently from the room. The stairs up to the seventh floor dorms had never seemed so long before. Each step was an effort. He wasn't afraid because he didn't know what would happen, he was afraid because he did know what was going to happen.

It wasn't Gryffindor bravery that dragged his feet up to his best friend's door. It was his Slytherin need to survive. He couldn't sleep or eat. He couldn't concentrate on anything for more than a couple minutes before falling back into the familiar, cloying anxiety. It just wasn't in his best interest to let this continue. That thought firmly in his mind, he knocked quietly on the closed bedroom door.

There was no answer. Biting his lip, Draco debated with himself. He could knock harder and possibly wake the other Fourth-year boys or he could accept Shadow wasn't talking to him and walk away. Draco surprised himself by reaching for the doorknob instead. It turned and he slipped into the dark room.

It was pitch black; the curtains on the underwater window were firmly closed, but he didn't need light to know where Shadow was. In fact, he didn't even need to see him to know what Shadow was feeling. Absently, Draco wondered if this was what having empathy was like. He had passed a Silencing Barrier and the sound of aimless piano notes surrounded him.

It was a lazily graceful sound, quietly and absentmindedly beautiful. Draco snorted and shook his head. It was just like Shadow to be so damn charming even when Draco was mad at the position the curly-haired teen was putting him in. The annoyance sparked his old need to get under his rival's skin. Smirking with the competitiveness that once drove him, Draco silently maneuvered across the room by memory.

"Can't sleep?" he drawled when he was close enough.

"FUCK!" Shadow yelled. He spun around on the bench with his heart slamming against his ribs in panic. He jerked backward, away from the unexpected voice in the darkness, and his back hit the keys with a deafening crash, further startling him and making him tumble to the floor.

"Lumos," Draco cast calmly. He smirked down at the panting and furiously glaring teen. "Need a hand?"
"Bloody prat!" Shadow spat and got to his feet without help. He crossed his arms, his stance braced. "What the fuck do you want?"

Draco's humor crumbled to dust as everything came rushing back. He turned his face to the piano. Shadows danced on the walls as the single spark of light shifted. "Why do you do it?"

Still upset by his friend ignoring him for days and then scaring the crap out of him, he missed the underlining tension in the question. "Why do I do what? Put up with your ass? I have no idea."

Draco snorted. He looked over at his friend and saw that his shadow was now behind him, tall and large, and it hit him like a physical blow. Shadow was fighting this fight because if he ran away, the problem would forever loom sinisterly behind him... like a shadow. So instead, he was stalking the threat, neutralizing it. It was the only way he could live without fear.

"It sucks."

"What does?" Shadow hissed, impatient. He uncurled his arms and tossed his bangs from his face. He had an almost irresistible urge to put his hands on his hips. Instead, he flopped on his bed and sat staring at the blond.

"This. All of it," Draco answered. His breathing constricted. "It's a ridiculously huge problem and inhumanly cruel for us to be the ones to fix it. We're fifteen years old for Merlin's sake! You're posing as being fourteen! We're just teenagers and a soulless monster is after us! If he finds out what we're doing..." he shuddered, his yells abruptly cutting off.

Shadow sighed and lay down, spreading his arms on the bed, feeling the soft cotton of the comforter. "Turn off the light," he asked quietly.

Draco looked at his friend for a second before complying. Plunged into darkness, he expected to feel fear, to feel like he was blind, but with the darkness, everything else disappeared. He was the only thing in existence. He was free. Slowly he became aware of the rhythmic sound of Shadow's breathing and now it was just him and Shadow. Just them. Nothing else. It was almost like flying.

"It's a lot," Shadow finally spoke. His voice was calm and strangely resonant. "It's going to be hard. And dangerous. It will most likely hurt. But it's not too much. We're going to win."

"Cocky much?" Draco laughed, inexplicable tears in the sound.

"Maybe I'm just a realist." Shadow grinned into the dark. "It sounds stupid, but I really feel like it's true."

"What?"

"That the world had better get out of our way. Even this."

Draco smirked and walked forward until he hit the bed. Shadow growled as Draco fell on his arm. There was a few minutes of maneuvering before they settled down again. Just laying in the dark.

"I'm still scared," he admitted quietly.

Shadow shrugged. "Not gonna stop us."

"I know," Draco admitted and closed his eyes.

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Ron came storming down the stairs and into the common room Sunday morning. Almost violently, he flung several pages of parchment onto the fire.

"What's with you?" Ginny asked. She, Hermione, and Neville had been waiting for him. Breakfast was almost over and they were near to the last people to leave, except for those who weren't planning on going at all and were still sleeping.

"That was a letter from Percy," Ron spat furiously. His fist lashed out and punched the wall. The girls' eyes got wide. "He wants to know why Hermione is giving the great Undersecretary a hard time in DADA. I guess Umbridge complains to Fudge or something about there being a group of students who she suspects has plans to work against the Ministry. Dear Percy thinks I need to distance myself from awful Hermione. That she may be influenced by a dangerous crowd of anarchists! He said anarchists and was talking about the Order!"

"He's a git," Ginny said forcefully. "We know the truth. Come on, Ron. Let's go eat."

"I can't. I'm too angry." Ron shook his head. "I mean, he's a git, yeah, but he's our brother! How can he just side with the Ministry against his own family, especially when the Ministry is being so blind and stupid? You-Know-Who is back and Percy is worried about the Order, as if they're the criminals! And he knows Hermione! He loved her, thought she had a good head on her shoulders. You'd think that would give him a reason to reconsider if she's barking or not! Argh! I'm going for a walk."

He stomped from the room, practically fuming. Hermione hurried after him. Ginny wisely let him go. Ron was no good when he was so worked up. Talking to him was pointless. She sighed. Neville's arm wrapped around her shoulders and she leaned into his side, smiling up at him.

"You okay?" Neville asked, his brown eyes filled with concern.

"Yeah," she promised. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. She loved the way he blushed. "I knew Percy was bad news a long time ago. Don't really know why, but I kind of erased him from my heart long before now. Percy always has pandered to authority and not in a good way. He has no internal sense of right and wrong, so he relies on others to tell him. I'm not surprised he's trailing along in Fudge's wake."

"I'm sorry," Neville said softly.

"Nah." She shook her head, her long red hair shimmering around her shoulders. "I told you. I'm okay."

She lifted her hands and ran her fingers through his thick brown hair. He was still getting taller. Every month he seemed to gain half an inch and was losing weight as he stretched. Neville was going from ugly duckling to swan before her eyes. She grinned up at him and let her hands settle on his broadening shoulders, amazed that she was still the only one that noticed how he was changing.

"What do you say we go to the kitchen, grab a few things to eat, and sit out by the lake?"

"Sure," he said and smiled at her like she was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Ginny kissed him. Like always, he kissed back, but when she tried to deepen it, he pulled gently back. Loving kisses he could do. Trying to push passion into it made him back off. It was frustrating and curious. Ginny was a passionate person. She couldn't help it. It was who she was. Making out, heavy petting, it felt good and she was dying to explore Neville, dying to have him touch her, to press her down with that powerful strength he sometimes let show.
Neville took her hand and they made their way down to the kitchen together, but Ginny's thoughts wouldn't leave her. She watched her boyfriend's back as they walked. She couldn't figure it out. She knew Neville liked her, maybe even loved her. What was the problem?

At first, she attributed it to him not knowing her very well. They were still new. But she had been dating Neville longer than anyone else, so why wouldn't he go further than a single kiss? Neville pulled her firmly aside as three second years ran passed yelling and pushing each other. He laughed, his eyes sparkling down at her.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You," she answered, cuddling against his chest.

"Well, you almost got run over by twelve-year-olds." Neville grinned. "Not very Seeker-like reflexes."

"I trusted you to protect me," Ginny teased and danced out of his arms. "I'm starving. Hurry up!"

Neville scowled playfully before grinning and giving chase. When they got to the kitchens, Ginny worked with the elves to put together a small picnic. Neville watched, laughing at Ginny's antics - she was pretending to be an elf - when the paper caught his eye. It was sitting on the counter.

"Oh no…" he muttered. Ginny appeared at his side almost like magic. He read out loud, "The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer and mastermind behind recent Death Eater activity is currently hiding in London. The Ministry warns that Black is a dangerous man who was found guilty of thirteen murders and is suspected in many more. Be on the look out and owl Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, with any further information. 500 galleon reward available for anyone who aids in the convict's arrest."

"Someone got careless," Ginny sighed.

Chapter end.
Sabotage

Minerva sat behind her desk, cradling a warm cup of tea. It was Monday morning already and the start of the third week of school. Her calm evaporated instantly as the fire flared. Emmeline Vance stepped free of the flames. Minerva had her answer as soon as she saw the other witch's face, but she dutifully asked for news anyway.

"I'm sorry," Emmeline said regretfully. "China won't cooperate. We've tried every angle. I even requested permission to send someone to look physically. Unless Harry tells us specifically where he is or comes back on his own, we can't reach him."

"I expected that to be the case," Minerva sighed. She wished the boy would just come home! She noticed her colleague's equally drawn face and straightened. She couldn't do anything for Harry now, but she did have obligations to the other people counting on her. She lifted the china teapot and gestured at a second cup. "Look on the bright side, Emma. If we can't get to Harry, then the Death Eaters can't either. Tea?"

Emmeline smiled. "Don't mind if I do, Minnie."

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MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST-EVER "HIGH INQUISITOR"

Shadow stared down at the front page headline. Draco leaned in to read with him. Both were frowning in seconds. Glancing quickly around the table, Draco noted those who shared their expression and those who remained neutral. He was pleased to see more Slytherins than he expected to read the article with faint disapproval.

"This Percy Weasley is certainly toeing the line, isn't he?" Shadow asked conversationally, although he felt icy rage crackling along his nerves that the bitch was being given such authority. "Is he related to the twins?"

"Their older brother," Draco answered, grey eyes scanning the article again. He froze when he got to the bottom.

"Your father seems to think it's a great idea," Pansy said silkily, her mouth curled in a malicious smile as she mentioned the quote from Lucius.

"It's interesting that they aren't even disguising the real purpose of the High Inquisitor," Blaise cut in. He could see the vicious temper rising in Draco's face and wanted to avoid the blowup for as long as possible. "I mean it says plainly, 'providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what's really happening at Hogwarts.' It's not about an educational reform at all."

"Of course it isn't," forth year Lillian Derrick snorted. "But what's the Minister so afraid of that he's desperate to get control of Hogwarts?"

"Hogwarts is a rallying point," Shadow explained, eyes hard. "The Minister fears that if Hogwarts contradicts them, for example goes against their statement that the Dark Lord isn't back, then it will undermine their position. Possibly even breed unrest."
"Umbridge can 'inspect' the other teachers," sixth year Terrence Higgs muttered. His eyes shifted up to the staff table and their Head of House. "I wonder what will happen if an inspection results in an unsatisfactory report."

"Only the Headmistress can sack a teacher, right?" Millicent frowned worriedly.

"For now," Draco said in disgust, throwing the paper down. "But martial law is right around the corner. Welcome to Hogwarts, the Induction Camp for the Ministry. Here all the little children are indoctrinated into being mindless, Ministry-abiding citizens."

Uneasy glances rippled down the table.

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The Fifth-year Gryffindor and Slytherin Potions class watched with wide-eyed fear as Professor Snape slammed the classroom door shut behind him and strode around the room in billowing robes. Their essays were returned to them with a vicious slap of paper hitting wood. His pale, sharp features were more gaunt than normal and black eyes looked even more intimidating.

"I have awarded you the grades you would have received if you presented this work in your O.W.L. examination. This should give you a realistic idea of what my expectations are for this year. The general standard of this homework was abysmal. I expect to see a great deal more effort for this week's essay on the diverse varieties of venom antidotes. I have assigned those who got D's or lower detention three nights this week. Possibly, I will allow the work done during this time to take the place of this appalling grade. If and only if it meets my exacting standards." He slashed his wand out and instructions scrawled across the board, "To work!"

Everyone jumped and scrambled to begin. Ron was in the middle of filling his cauldron with water when he noticed Hermione's stunned expression. She hadn't made a move to start brewing and Ron couldn't ever remember a time when she hadn't jumped at the chance to do school work.

"Hermione?"

"I got detention," she whispered, still shocked.

"You got a D?" Ron was baffled. He had gotten a P, one grade up from a D. How had he done better than Hermione? It was impossible! "You must have read it wrong." He grabbed her paper from her limp hands and saw the big, black, spiky D on top. She had detention for the following three nights. "Dear Merlin..." Ron literally felt like the world was tilting under his feet. He couldn't comprehend the situation. He felt further confused when a small smile spread across Hermione's face.

"Don't you get it?" Hermione whispered, warm eyes sparkling with silent laughter. "He's protecting me! If I have detention with Professor Snape, I can't have detention with Umbridge!"

"Less chatting and more brewing!" Professor Snape's voice cracked across the room.

Ron shook his head. He still didn't understand, but Hermione was grinning as she began working on the assignment. Whatever had happened, he figured it didn't matter as long as Hermione wasn't upset about it. Still... Hermione got a D? Amazed, he fumbled his way through the day's potion, the letter D marching across his thoughts relentlessly.

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Shadow walked into his last class for the day. He wasn't surprised to see Umbitch sitting at the front
of the room in a corner while Professor Krum pointedly ignored her. The Fifth-year Gryffindors were staring at the toad-like woman with slight curiosity and fear. Krum began the lesson as he always did, but just as everyone was forgetting about the High Inquisitor's presence, she coughed and interrupted. She did this every ten minutes or so, making a muttered comment or throwing out a pointed question.

"… heavy accent… How long have you been speaking English, Mr. Krum? … confused expression on students' faces… How old are you, Mr. Krum? … possible lack of respect due to the youth of instructor… What are your qualifications for teaching such a difficult subject? …"

Shadow was impressed with the ex-Seeker's self-control. He could tell that there was a strong dislike between the two teachers, but it wasn't until the end of class that Krum finally snapped.

"I vonder," Krum growled, his blocky features hard and his dark eyebrows forming an angry V above his cold eyes, "how you expect to gather the idea of my teaching if you continue interrupting?"

Umbridge noted a few more things on her clipboard and smiled kindly. "You will receive the results of your inspection in ten days time, Mr. Krum."

Turning to his class, Krum told them their homework assignment and dismissed them. Shadow left the room, noting Hermione's furious expression and Ron's nervous one. Parvati and Lavender were walking in front of them and were gossiping loudly to each other.

"She inspected Professor Trelawney before lunch! She made her cry, insinuating that she's worthless! Can you believe it?"

"Why doesn't McGonagall do something about it? Umbridge is awful!"

"She can't," Hermione snapped. "Of course she can't! The Ministry is elbowing their way in here and if she does anything too overt they could kick her out and take over completely!"

"No!" Lavender gasped.

"She's right," Shadow spoke up.

All eyes turned to him. They stood in the hall, most of them still clutching their Transfiguration books, having left so quickly that they didn't stop to put them away. Shadow gestured them over into a corner, away from the milling students and threw up a strong privacy ward. The Gryffindors looked both nervous and suspicious.

"Umbridge has it out for my father," he told them. "She wants him sacked and everyone else she suspects of possibly holding anti-Ministry sentiments, whether they really do or not. The Headmistress is using her position to prevent this, but in order to stop the big things, she has to let the relatively small stuff go. Umbridge has a lot of say since the Minister has the support of some key parents."

"That's not fair!" Ron said. "I hate Snape, but sacking him s'just not right. He belongs to Hogwarts! She shouldn't be able to sack anyone!"

"Yeah," Parvati agreed. "It doesn't much feel like Hogwarts anymore with her lurking around, does it?"

"She's ruining everything." Lavender scowled, flinging her long hair over her shoulder. "I'm going to write my father. Maybe he can write the Ministry and complain. Not all parents are okay with this!"
"Me, too!" Parvati exclaimed and the two girls hurried off.

Hermione looked at Shadow calculatingly. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"What?" Shadow blinked his strange eyes innocently.

"That's not really your look, mate," Ron snorted.

"In any case, I think it's a good idea. The Prophet said these new educational decrees have been supported by the parents. If we can get a large group of parents to protest, maybe it will slow the Minister and Umbridge down," Hermione exclaimed. She pushed her hair out of her face and a spark of obsession shining in her eyes.

"Oh, no," Ron sighed, "I know that look."

"Come on, Ron. We have to spread the word!" Hermione grabbed her friend by the arm and dragged him down the corridor.

Shadow watched them go with a smile.

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"I don't get it," Pansy hissed. "You've changed. You've become soft. What happened to the old Draco Malfoy?"

Draco stood and pinned the girl roughly against the wall in one fluid movement. Soft blond hair fell forward from behind his ears and framed his cheeks as he stared coldly into Pansy's blue eyes. "I haven't changed, Pansy," he whispered. He pressed his mouth to hers, intending to shock her enough to get her to finally listen to him.

The kiss was exactly like the ones they had shared off and on for the last two years. His hand trailed up into her hair, holding her head firmly as his tongue dominated her mouth. The ribbon tying it came undone, spilling shoulder-length black locks over her shoulders. Draco pulled away. Pansy stared at him, her mouth hot and wet, her cheeks flushed with pleasure.

"Like I said, I haven't changed. I've just grown up, Parkinson," he told her coolly, unaffected by the kiss. "I'm not a child to blindly accept the world as it's presented to me. I asked questions and I saw the truth with my own eyes. The Dark Lord is not the answer. He is not the ideal leader that we were told to expect. He isn't out to secure our future or our traditions. He may have started out that way, but he lost control of the magic. Instead of shaping the Dark to his wishes, the Dark is shaping him. He's done the unforgivable. He's lost control and become inhuman."

"Shut up!" Pansy shrieked. She was breathing fast as if she were running. Her hands clawed at the wall at her back and she was acutely aware of the half dozen Slytherins standing around the common room watching this drama unfold, watched as Draco took control of the situation and stole her initiative. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes. I. Do."

Draco shoved his hands in his pockets to hide the faint trembling that the adrenaline rush was giving him. Cold purpose spread through his veins and he could feel the importance of the moment. It was now. It was here. This was the moment that was going to make or break him. He either made a solid dent in their blind faith or he would forever close their ears to his words.

The pressure only made him more determined. He stood tall, loose, radiating his superiority as he had
been taught. Proud and in control, the Malfoy lessons gripped him harder than they ever had before because this time he wasn't just mimicking the mannerisms. He actually felt them come to life, fueled by his conviction, tempered by the real life sacrifices he had made. He really wasn't a child anymore. Slytherin House wasn't just a playground to practice political games. This was as real as it got. These were his peers and friends. What happened here had consequences that would affect their lives as well as his own.

All this shimmered in Draco's intense gaze as he spoke. "Have you seen the Dark Lord, Pansy? With your own eyes? I have. Can you honestly tell me that since his resurrection the Death Eaters have not behaved strangely? Lucius Malfoy was a great and powerful Pureblood wizard, but my father came home changed. He would wear the same clothes for days on end, forgetting to bathe or eat. His temper became unpredictable. He physically struck my mother and me without provocation."

There were gasps around the room.

"That's right." Draco smiled, a hard sneering expression revealing his contempt for their ignorance. "He hit us. Like some common Muggle, forgetting to use his wand. That's what the Dark Lord has done to my proud Pureblood father."

"Lies!" Pansy gasped weakly.

"I'm not lying, my dear." Draco laughed. "If it weren't true, why would I be doing all this? Professor Snape is right. The Dark Lord has turned his followers into slaves in his madness, changing them from the proud advocates they once were. I refuse to be a slave. True Malfoys grovel to no one! I will protect the traditions of my family and do honor to my Pureblood line. I will not follow after a madman bent on a path of pointless sadism and self-gratification!"

"If the Dark Lord... If it's true..." Pansy said softly, pleadingly. "Then what can we do? How can we go against him? He's not going to be denied. He'll just kill us along with everyone else."

Draco shook his head, realizing with that soft plea Pansy had revealed weakness. She had made his argument and position ten times stronger, was practically arguing for him now. He smiled with deceptive softness. "Don't be stupid, Pansy. It's not some dramatic choice between two paths. Real life is always more complicated than that.” He paused, casually hooking his hair behind an ear, backing down while he had the advantage. "I'm not saying you should defy the Dark Lord openly and stand on the front lines of the war. There are other choices. Professor Snape told you this weeks ago. Have you gone to him like he asked?"

Silence met this question and Draco shrugged. "You can never have too much information. Don't forget how Professor Snape always protected us. He joined the Dark Lord because he wanted to protect our way of life. He was so respected, he was admitted into the Inner Circle. Really think about what would drive a man like Professor Snape away. Talk to him, Pansy. Then make your own decisions instead of following blindly like some Hufflepuff."

"I'm not listening to this. You're wrong. You're the one who's crazy." She pushed herself from the wall and ran up to her room, tears in her eyes.

Draco shrugged again and sat down on the couch where he had been doing homework before Pansy interrupted him. "If there aren't any other questions, I'd like to finish my work," he said into the air, eyes scanning the Slytherins who had witnessed the exchange. No one answered him, so he bent over his books.

A few moments later he heard murmurs rise out of the soft buzz of conversation. "... maybe we should talk to Professor Snape... see what he has to say..." Draco felt almost giddy with triumph.
He had done it! He had won! He felt invincible! For the first time in a long time, Draco felt like a Malfoy again and he couldn't wait to tell Shadow.

They couldn't talk about their plan where anyone might hear, so he’d have to wait until Friday when they planned to go down to the Chamber. Flaunting how close they were only made their tasks more difficult, so they had agreed to visit each other in their bedrooms as little as possible and were making a point of hanging out with other people during the day.

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Tuesday during his free period before dinner, Shadow asked the twins to meet him in a classroom on the first floor. They did so, bringing cauldrons and ingredients to work on their next prank on Umbridge. Shadow had picked the classroom on purpose, knowing that Rogan and his group often came there to talk and hang out before dinner.

Sure enough, he felt the passive wards on the door tingle halfway through the brewing process. Fred and George remained oblivious, but their evil grins and dramatic cackles as the potion bubbled were perfect. Shadow made a few pointed comments, smiling with his own sense of pleasure at getting revenge. The twins nodded and added a few more things to the potion.

The tingle went away five minutes later. Rogan and the others had seen enough. They knew now that Shadow was helping the twins, that he had cleverly arranged to hide his attack behind others so that he wouldn't get caught, and that he wouldn't tolerate the blatant attacks Umbitch had been hitting him with. They would hopefully respect his Slytherin cunning and open up to him more.

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Umbridge made her way to breakfast Wednesday morning feeling gleeful. She had a perfect way to trap little Snape Jr. into a detention. The little brat was behind her potential Slytherin spies turning silent, she just knew it! Well, she wouldn't let that evil Death Eater child get away with this. She'd punish him and make him realize what going against the Ministry meant!

As she made her way through the Great Hall, she turned and smiled happily at the source of all her troubles. As if sensing her gaze, the teen turned. Even from across the room, she could see the blue and green eyes stare into her. Hiding a shudder, she quickly sat down. Minerva was speaking to the dumpy Sprout about something unimportant. She sneered. The woman was obviously not fit to be Headmistress.

Her morning tea slid down her throat and she sighed with pleasure. There was nothing like tea first thing in the morning. She wasn't aware that the twins were staring at her avidly. She wasn't aware that a talk with the house elves that morning guaranteed that their potion would be slipped into her drink, the drink she had just finished.

The potion took effect almost immediately. Umbridge began scratching her arms and her cheeks, absently at first but within fifteen minutes she was scratching more firmly and there were obvious red blotches beginning spread over her skin. With a horrified gasp, Umbridge stared at her hands and felt at her face. The itching was getting worse.

"Oh my!" McGonagall turned to look at the woman. "Do you have a food allergy you did not inform me of, Dolores?"

"I have no allergy!" Umbridge yelled at her. "Someone did this to me. Just like that damn fish!"

"That is a serious accusation," McGonagall said with a deep frown. "You should go to Poppy
immediately. She will be able to tell if this is natural, and if not she, should be able to counter whatever was done."

"I hope you plan on finding the culprits," Umbridge warned, her eyes cruel.

"If there are culprits to find," McGonagall allowed, bowing her head in agreement.

Umbridge shot a hateful glance at the Slytherin table and hurried from the room, practically running. The itch was growing into a devastating burn. She was in so much pain she didn't even notice the laughter that followed her out.

Poppy ran several tests and finally discovered the source of the problem. "You are allergic to sunlight."

"What?" Umbridge gasped.

"Sunlight. It causes skin irritation and often a rash. Direct sunlight will begin to burn the skin. It's a similar condition to what the vampires suffer," the mediwitch told her.

"Vampires..." she said faintly.

"Do you know how you contracted the disease? Do you have a vampire friend perhaps?"

"Of course not!" Umbridge cried, horrified. "I don't have a disease! This is a prank!"

"There are some irregularities," Poppy allowed, "but I cannot imagine how you would get such results from a prank. Perhaps it is a new strain. I should quarantine you here."

"I think not!" Umbridge spat. "This was done to me and I will prove it!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to prove it in a very dark room or one that has only artificial light. You cannot go and walk around the halls, that is for sure!" Poppy scolded. "You are allergic to sunlight, if I must remind you!"

"I demand that you fetch the Headmistress. Now!"

It wasn't long before McGonagall was forced to call Shadow up to the Infirmary. Shadow had expected the move and had already taken the anti-Veritaserum that his father had invented. Umbridge scowled unhappily as the teen told them all under the influence of truth serum that he was not responsible for the prank, that he didn't know there was a prank in action, and had never heard of such a prank before.

All the DADA classes for the rest of the week were canceled. Umbridge had to wait until nightfall to skulk back to her rooms. Of course, a few young eyes witnessed this journey through the castle. They were shocked to watch the woman dodge moonbeams, which were after all made of reflected sunlight.

Rumors lit through the castle like wildfire. By morning, everyone was certain that Umbridge had either been bitten by a vampire or was perhaps a vampire sex-slave. The best rumor yet was one that said she had been turned by Professor Snape because she was preying on his son and he wouldn't share his secret potion that made him immune to sunlight. This was supported by the fact that Professor Snape had been caught actually smiling several times that week.

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"Mr. Snape," Remus called as History class came to an end. "Please stay behind."

As Shadow did so, feelings of suspicion began bubbling up his spine. Remus had been off all during class. It was simple things and he didn't think anyone else had noticed, but Shadow's paranoia was confirmed when the usually gentle man gave him a wolfish grin. Abruptly Shadow realized that it was the full moon tonight and Remus should have been sick as a dog, so to speak. In fact, he should have been absent since yesterday and out for half next week as well.

His wand snapped up and he growled, "Who are you?"

"Can't you guess?" the Remus look-alike laughed.

Shadow knew that laugh. His wand dropped and he asked with wide-eyes, "Sirius?"

"Since yesterday morning." Sirius grinned again, the expression wrong on so many levels upon Remus's features.

Shadow sighed. "This is ridiculous. The Ministry is desperately searching for you and wants to string you up for all the world to see and you're living in the same castle as the Undersecretary and new Hogwarts's High Inquisitor. You told me you'd be more careful after that London sighting!"

"Well, Remus can't go absent every full moon," Remus-Sirius argued, arms crossed petulantly. "Umbridge will know what he is in a second. She's the one that passed all those anti-werewolf laws forbidding him to have job two years ago. Anyway, I know Remus better than anyone. I can handle being him for a week out of every month."

"I hope you're right." Shadow smiled ruefully. "It is a good plan."

"I'm not the only genius around here," the man grinned, cheerful once more. "Awesome prank on dear sweet Dolores. I couldn't have done better myself! Have you heard the rumor that your father did it to her?" He barked out a laugh, his new hazel eyes shining manically. "Beautiful! Just beautiful!"

Shadow laughed. "I know, isn't it? I didn't expect it, but it's hilarious! I remember when I thought Severus was a vampire myself."

Remus-Sirius came over and ruffled his godson's hair, literal tears shining in his eyes. "I'm so proud of you. You have the gift, my boy."

"Thank you, dear dogfather!" Shadow said with a mocking bow.

The smile softened on the imposter's face, approaching something that was more Remus-like as the next History class began to file into the room. Shadow gave him a wave and left, shaking his head in amazement at the sheer number of secrets being kept in the school.

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Since he had a free period before dinner, Shadow decided to go to the common room and get some homework started. The pile was really beginning to stack up.

"So how long will the potion last?"

Shadow looked up to see Rogan, Miles, and Lillian standing beside him. "What are you talking about?" he feigned confusion.
"We saw you," Rogan explained. "With the twins."

"We know you did something to Umbridge," Lillian smirked. "Pretty clever."

Shadow studied them. "You going to tell on me?"

"Nope." Rogan sat next to him with a grin. "It was a really cool prank. How'd you do it?"

Lillian and Miles settled on the other couches, forming a loose circle. Shadow smiled and told them the basics. Soon they were talking about Quidditch and past Weasley pranks. Shadow was in.

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They were sitting in their comfortable armchairs besides the basilisk corpse. The small table between them had snacks and drinks. It was Friday night so they were both in comfortable button-down shirts and cotton slacks instead of the stiff starched ones they wore under their school robes. Their feet were bare. Shadow was sprawled in his chair, one leg hooked over the arm. His curls were in messy disarray and he was laughing at he listened to his friend.

Draco was sitting at the edge of his seat describing the confrontation with Pansy. He gesticulated widely with every new point and his face was animated with excitement. "... and I couldn't have set it up any better if I had planned it!" he exclaimed. "You should have heard them, Shadow! They're going to go talk to Severus to get his opinion and view of things!"

"Looks like we've been really lucky." Shadow grinned. "The set-up with the twins worked like a charm, too. Rogan and his neutral, anti-Dark Lord group have accepted me. They'll open the way to others."

"When should we bring up the idea of the defense group?" Draco asked, eyes bright.

"Not yet. We should let it settle for a while. Maybe after next week," Shadow answered, sighing and leaning back lazily, content with the world. "Things are falling into place, aren't they? This is going to work."

"Yeah." Draco flopped back, slouching. They sat in silence for a minute. "What are your plans for this weekend?"

"Dad's been negotiating with Salazar and they finally worked out an agreement. Salazar will examine the bond to Tom in exchange for being allowed to study Boy for this weekend only. It starts tonight. Salazar is going to be in my head for the next two days. Other than that, I have tons of homework and want to hang out with Rogan as much as possible Saturday. I have therapy with my dad Sunday night plus the bath treatment and we'll probably discuss Salazar's conclusions on the bond and Boy then."

Draco nodded. "You'll let me know what Salazar says?"

"Course."

Another moment of silence fell around them. Then almost at the same time, their eyes met. Draco smiled slowly, "Want to duel?"

"I'd love to." Shadow leaped to his feet, shooting off a spell.

Draco rolled backward over the arm of his chair and out of the path of the red streak of light. Then they were running and dodging among the Chamber's pillars, spells zipping and splashing around
Shadow was an incredible dueler. He was at the point where he could cast a verbal wandless spell while at the same time casting a completely different non-verbal spell through his wand. Draco’s talent was his intuition. He dueled like a dancer, full of graceful movements and patience as he slowly began to predict what his opponent would do next. He concentrated on defense, waiting for the right moment to strike, always slipping his spells into the small openings his opponent presented. Overall, they were pretty evenly matched.

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A bright flash of light and he was falling through the water created ripples that raced away, announcing his presence. Salazar reached out automatically and soothed them. The fish that had startled at his entrance settled back into their patterns again. He looked around with humble wonder.

The mind was his specialty. No one understood the mind as he did. Magic came from the mind, not the soul. Some minds were more simple and others more complex. Some minds had the capability to sustain magic, had the ability to manipulate it.

In his youth, he wanted to see if he could expand the mind through breeding. See if he could isolate the most advanced minds and make them evolve along a fast exponential curve. That was the source of his anti-Muggle movement. Later, he came to realize that inbreeding would likely stall the evolution of the mind he had been striving for.

In any case, he had advanced past that ignorance. He had continued to learn. Salazar had been studying the makeup of the mind for centuries. And with such knowledgeable eyes, he looked around him now and felt almost like he was finally seeing the advanced mind he had envisioned so long ago.

The water was a clear turquoise blue of the perfect temperature. It darkened as he swam deeper, and at the bottom, in murky darkness, was the ocean floor, which shifted with fish and creatures that were hidden and camouflaged under the surface.

Seaweed - a healthy dark green - grew tall and waved gently in the currents. The long leafy plants grew abundantly, and the many fish - small silver minnows to large catfish - darted in and out of the leafy vegetation, swimming back and forth between the many clumps scattered throughout the ocean landscape.

These many fish represented the connections between the different knowledge groups this mind contained. The intricate and seemingly chaotic patterns these fish made represented the practical everyday processes of the brain: the logic centers, memory recall, bodily functions and control centers. Salazar could gaze upon it for years. He had never seen it laid out so clearly and realistically in a mind before. It was awe-inspiring!

As he turned away from the seaweed, his eyes caught on the crystalline castles of coral. These were the representations of the emotional centers. Bright angel fish, koi, violent beautiful betas, and many more brightly colored swimmers swarmed these small coral reefs. They were the memories that were created with the emotions of the coral they were swimming around.

Most of the fish swam back and forth between different emotional clusters. It was rare for a person to only feel one emotion during charged events. The fish mimicked this, and like the fish with the seaweed, they also swam in patterns. These indicated behavior habits and personality type.

Salazar looked around at this underwater jungle. The seaweed and coral mixed and scattered in a
way that seemed aimless but felt symmetrical. The bright flashy coral fish and the sleek silver seaweed fish swam across each other's paths or temporarily mixed and swam together. Some high near the sunlit surface, some lower toward the ocean floor. They were great interlocking and networking systems. This was the masterpiece of life.

The final touch in this marvelous world was the glorious water. The water! It glowed faintly - like the moon would - sparkled in the corner of Salazar's eye. Occasional electric sparks snapped up the ribbons of seaweed or crackled among the coral. This was magic's representation, that which made a man a wizard!

Occlumency shields were represented in this place by glass. As if the oceanscape was just some underwater exhibit for tourists, but the glass wasn't clear. It would appear mirrored to anyone looking in, but from Shadow's point of view the glass merely looked cloudy. Having mirrors pointed inward would no doubt cause strain. No one could stand to look at themselves for too long. The panels were strong, the mind behind it safe… except for in one place. There was a long crack in one of the panels… A crack in the shape of a lightning bolt.

With a brief examination of the area, Salazar knew what was happening. Done with the obligatory job, he turned back to the real object of his interest. The scattered coral reefs. Some of the coral reefs were bright and healthy. Others were choked with a black, weed-type vine that limited its growth and access. The red coral - the passion and creativity generator - was one such. This meant suppression, which was a common psychological phenomena. More interesting to Salazar were the two coral reefs that grew downward.

He had never seen anything like it. One was a white-orange reef - the color of hot metal - and the other was bruise-purple. The first represented rage, the other represented ear and despair. From each reef, a single branch coiled upward into the conscious. These had a few fish swimming around them indicating that the mind did have a sense of these emotions in an elementary way.

Salazar guessed that Shadow would have a flash of anger or fear, but it would morph into something else. Anger would become bitterness, hate would become disgust, fear would become uneasiness, despair would melt into a simpler sorrow. Less powerful, less of a motivator, less consuming. In Shadow's mind, the mother-emotion of these two coral reefs were siphoned off and fed below.

Salazar floated down to find heavily padlocked doors at the base of these inverted coral formations. One was made of wood, the other granite. They would be very difficult to open and it would damage the mind to do so, but Salazar didn't want to open the doors. He just wanted to slip under them, like water through a crack.

Working with a metaphor that was compatible to the environment, the phantom raised the wooden door so that it was taut against the chains and locks binding it and melted through the tiny opening. A whole new mind opened up before him. Small and compact compared to the extensive mind above him, it was nevertheless relatively whole in its own right.

The small room was pitch-black. Willing himself to be able to "see in the dark", Salazar could see everything plainly. He was standing in what looked like a large cupboard. Abstract pictures, like a child's crayon drawings, were taped to the inward slanting wall. There were four of them. One was filled with red-black circular scribbles, another had what looked like grey clouds, the third had deep blue stars, and the last had purple spikes. These were the emotional centers. Pain, despair, grief, and fear.

Dried rivulets of blood stained the wall from the ceiling down to the pictures, giving evidence that fresh blood - fresh emotion siphoned down from the coral reefs - had been there. Wet, warm blood still dripped from the crayoned pictures - the emotion centers - and kept the pictures connected to the
pool of blood on the floor. The puddle contained all of Boy's memories. If you looked, you could see them played out on the surface of the red liquid in an endless nightmarish loop.

In each corner and along the ceiling, woven among the pictures and blood-covered wall were huge, intricate spider webs. The small insects crawled - some rapidly, others with slow grace - along the sparkling strands. The spiders represented the thought processes and behavioral patterns of Boy. There were no layers - no subconscious or unconscious - just spiders moving along one geometrical plane indicating a mind that was purely made up of the conscious.

The web filaments represented the magical capacity of the mind. They indicated a very specialized type of magic - in this case Salazar was aware it was healing. Also unique, there was a physical human body represented here, symbolizing the disconnection of the mind from any real physical body.

A small, mutilated child with broken bones - a hand, the opposite forearm, a thigh. The child was sleeping, curled into a fetal position, whimpering softly. Salazar was certain that if fresh blood - or memories - came into the room and entered the memory puddles, Boy would scream, cry, thrash, and display other similar behaviors to express himself, despite the fact that no one would be here to witness it. That didn't matter. The most basic need of any conscious creature is the need to express itself. Through this act, the creature states its existence, gives proof that it is alive.

It was utterly fascinating. The fact that a human mind, even a wizard's, could create another equally alive mind and sustain it! The possibilities and implications of this were astounding! Enthralled, Salazar settled down to study the miracle of this small isolated mind contained within a bigger host mind.

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"That's Julian Montague, Seventh-year," Miles explained. "He's the Captain and a Chaser on our team."

Shadow looked up at the Slytherin Quidditch team flying drills. It was hilarious that he was allowed - even invited - to watch them practice; if his companions even suspected he was really the Gryffindor Golden Boy Harry Potter, they would be livid that he was seeing something so top-secret.

The four of them were sitting in the stands - the Slytherin side of course. It was about three in the afternoon. For the first time all week, the sky was cloudless and dry. The cool breeze felt good against Shadow's warm skin, his head had been throbbing ever since last night when Salazar had begun studying his head.

"Montague is really serious about the Quidditch Cup this year because it's his last chance to get the attention of the professional teams," Miles continued, the sandy-haired boy flushed with enthusiasm. "Our only real competition is Gryffindor this year. Seventh-year Angelina Johnson is their Captain. She's also a Chaser, but it's her first year as Captain. We hope that gives us an edge."

"I'm more interested in Pucey and Vaisley," Lillian interrupted. "Having girls on the Slytherin team is pretty rare, and this year there are two! Cassandra Pucey plays Chaser, she's a Sixth-year. Patricia Vaisley is Keeper. It really sucks she's leaving after this year. She's wicked good!"

"They look like they know what they're doing," Shadow allowed, shading his eyes to watch them play, but in the end, he couldn't keep his eyes off the flash of pale white. "Is Draco any good? He mentioned being a Seeker, but I never really thought to ask before."

"He's pretty good." Rogan laughed. "He only ever lost the Snitch to Harry Potter. He was
Gryffindor's Seeker, but he's disappeared this year. I heard a rumor the other day that he's off in another country getting secret training to defeat the Dark Lord."

Startled, Shadow's eyes snapped to the auburn-haired teen. "What?"

Rogan shrugged. "I don't know for sure. It's just a rumor. I overheard some Fourth-year Gryffindors talking about it in the halls yesterday."

"Oh."

The whole point of those letters was to get the word out that the Chosen One wasn't dead and give some people hope. It just surprised him that it had happened so fast. Forcing himself to relax, Shadow took a deep breath and look back up at the Quidditch team. Montague had stopped the drills to yell heatedly at Crabbe and Goyle who had gotten in the way of Chaser Hammond Urquhart, a lanky Sixth-year with intense hazel eyes.

"Malfoy's pretty good," Miles continued, picking up where the conversation had trailed off. "At first, he was only let on the team because his father bought really top-of-the-line brooms for everyone, but he practiced hard and got pretty good. I think he could have beaten Potter, but their rivalry distracted him. He focused more on Potter and less on the Snitch."

Shadow smiled. "He can be a bit obsessive, can't he?"

"You can say that." Lillian laughed.

A flash of light to fifty feet in the air and to his right caught his attention. Shadow turned his head, eyes riveted on the Snitch, which seemed incredibly sharper now that he didn't need to wear glasses. He never realized just how much his poor vision handicapped him until that moment.

Miles noticed where his attention was and whistled. "Wow," he said. "Wish we had brooms. We could go and try to catch it."

"Do you play Quidditch?" Shadow turned to ask him.

"Only games for fun." Miles smiled sadly. "I have brittle bones. Have to take potions every month for it. I'm not allowed to play if the game is going to be too rough, but I'd love to be a Seeker."

"Miles is really good," Rogan said and ruffled the smaller boy's hair fondly. "He has eagle eyes, don't you?"

Miles blushed. "What about you, Shadow? Do you play Quidditch?"

"I grew up alone mostly." He shrugged. "Can't really play Quidditch, but I raced a lot on my broom. Timing myself and sometimes going against my dad or my tutor."

"We should have a racing team," Miles sighed. "I could probably do that."

"That would be cool," Shadow agreed. He looked back into the sky, hoping it was safe. It wasn't. The Snitch was still in sight, looping lazily. God, he just wanted to just fly after it with his broom. It had been forever since he had flown. The temptation would have been too much if it weren't for his headache.

Suddenly, Draco was there, diving after the small golden ball. His eyes were intense, his grin huge on his face, hair windblown and having fun. Shadow felt painfully jealous.
"Took you long enough!" he taunted. "We've been staring at that thing for a good twenty minutes!"

"Think you could do better, Snape?" Draco drawled teasingly, he twitched the end of his broom in a sweeping motion. "Why don't you come up here and prove it."

Heart racing, pumping with adrenaline, Shadow wanted nothing more than to hop on a broom to battle in the air over the elusive Snitch like they had in the past. He stood to accept his friend's challenge, but he got up too fast. A curtain of black fell over his vision and his sense of balance tipped.

"Shadow?" Lillian frowned, supporting him as he fell back into his seat, his face pale. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said with an impatient shake of his head. "Just stood up too fast."

Miles frowned, eyes filled with worry, and looked pointedly at Rogan. The teen nodded subtly and said, "I'm getting hot. Why don't we go in for some ice-cream and come back out when it's cooler for some racing. Sound good?"

Agreement met his suggestion and the four Slytherins made their way back to the Hogwarts, leaving the Quidditch team and a very worried blond to their practice.

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"Good afternoon, I'm sorry the shadows are long today," Luna said dreamily as she stepped into the kitchens.

Shadow looked up at the small blonde girl and smiled. "Hello, Luna."

Rogan snorted. "You know Loony?"

"She's my friend," Shadow warned him coldly.

Rogan stared open-mouthed as Shadow offered the crazy Ravenclaw a seat at the kitchen table with them. Miles and Lillian answered their friend's questioning gaze with shrugs. Luna smiled at Shadow, her blue eyes never moving from his face. Rogan doubted the girl even realized they were there.

"I was walking and the windows told me something," she explained as she took his hand and tugged him toward the door. She was grinning. "I think there'll be Crumple-Horned Snorkacks running on the grounds today. Help me look for them? A picture would be worth a lot. No one has been able to catch them on film before. I brought my camera."

Shadow noticed the black strap around her neck, but at the end was a pale pink conch shell. "All right," he said, giving in after a moment. His head was feeling better after sitting in the dim kitchen eating cold ice cream. He could stand to walk around for a bit. Besides he kind of felt bad that he hadn't had a chance to talk to Luna since the Hogwarts Express.

"You do know there is no such thing as a Snorkack and that the shell won't take pictures," Rogan asked to be sure.

"Who cares?" Shadow shrugged with a grin. "Sometimes it's fun to play along. Never know what you'll find."

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It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Most of Ginny's homework was done, she had Quidditch practice to look forward to tomorrow, and she was sitting by the lake with her boyfriend. The sun was warm, the breeze was cool. The sound of the sparkling blue water gently slapping against the bank lulled her into a tranquil place.

Turning in Neville's arms, Ginny pressed her lips to his. He tasted wonderful, warm and safe. Lazily, her tongue lapped out… and Neville gently ended the kiss and leaned away to smile at her like nothing was wrong. Her blissful mood popped like a bubble.

"Why do you do that?" She frowned up at him. She had waited long enough for Neville to open up to her. It was time to take things into her own hands.

"Do what?" he asked, head tilted in confusion. His hand came up and brushed along her cheek, trying to sooth her, but she wasn't having it.

Ginny pushed his hand away and pulled out of his lap. She turned to face him, sitting cross-legged. "You always pull away. I'll try to kiss you and you won't let me."

"We kiss all the time," Neville protested, blushing bright red, but there was more than shy embarrassment in his eyes. Ginny saw panic.

"You know what I mean, Nev," Ginny insisted. "Why won't you tell me? Is it me? Don't you like me like that? Because I think I'm making it pretty clear how I like you."

"Gin…" Neville shifted his weight nervously before standing.

Ginny jumped up to her own feet and grabbed his arm. "No. We have to talk about this. I mean it. I'm your girlfriend, for Merlin's sake. Tell me what's wrong!"

"Nothing's wrong, Gin," Neville maintained, but his hands were beginning to shake. "Don't do this. Everything is going so good. I love you."

"It's not going good," Ginny said angrily. "And if you loved me, you'd admit it. Neville, what's gotten into you? This isn't like you. You can trust me. Talk to me. Why don't you like kissing and touching me?"

"We can't talk about it here," Neville said desperately. His eyes darted around, looking for a way to escape, but Ginny was holding him fast.

"What's wrong?" she asked more gently. Her heart was racing in her chest as she watched her boyfriend begin to fall apart. Something was really, really wrong here. "Nev, hey, come on. It's all right. No one can hear us. Just calm down."

Neville yanked his arm away as soon as he felt her fingers relax a bit. He backed a few steps, his heart twisting at the hurt look on Ginny's face. This wasn't her fault. She didn't understand and he didn't want her to. The wind picked up and she raised her hand to hold her long red hair out of her face. Neville hated himself when he saw the tears in her eyes. She was too beautiful to cry.

"I love you, Nev," she whispered. "You're special. I know you are. I just wish you'd show it more. I wish you trusted me. I just want to be with you and you won't let me. I don't understand why, but I guess I don't have to. If you can't let me in, then… Then I guess we're done here. I can only be your friend and wait until you can trust me."

"Ginny…" Neville reached for her helplessly. "I do trust you."
"Prove it," she pleaded, not stepping forward to take his hand.

"I just… can't…" Neville tried to explain.

"Then I don't think I can be your girlfriend," she said sadly.

"Gin! Wait!" Neville begged, stumbling after her. "Can't you try to understand?"

"I am trying to understand," she hissed in frustration. "Can't you try to understand that?"

"I just… It's hard… I…"

Neville could hardly walk. His legs felt like jelly. Ginny was the first girl to really try to see him. She laughed with him and never underestimated him. She thought he was special and could do whatever he put his mind to. Neville had worth in her eyes and he had never dreamed of being able to gain the affection of someone so confident and beautiful.

Ginny was smart and powerful. She commanded respect and was mischievously clever like the twins. He really did love her; for her goodness and strength among a hundred other reasons, and that was why he didn't want to explain. He didn't want to taint her view of him. He needed her to look at him like they were equals, and he wouldn't be when she knew how damaged he was.

"Please… Ginny…"

"Neville…" She sighed and turned around to face him. "I like you a lot. I really, really do. I'm not trying to hurt you. I just wish you had told me if you weren't ready to be in a relationship like this."

"No!" Neville gasped. "No, Ginny… I just… I just don't want you to hate me!"

They stood still and silent after the desperate proclamation, broken only when Ginny melted and ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck. "Neville Longbottom! Don't be dumb! I wouldn't hate you. I'm not asking you to do anything; I just want you to explain so I understand. I don't mind not doing stuff like that. Really."

Neville held her tightly. He couldn't catch his breath and his arms itched so badly! He wanted to get away, to cut and make everything disappear for awhile, but if he left now, then she wouldn't forgive him. He would lose Ginny. But if he told her, he'd lose her, too! He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe!

His panicked eyes focused over Ginny's shoulder. Up the path toward the school, Shadow was heading toward them. Neville’s legs almost gave out with relief. He raised his arm in greeting; he could breathe again. Ginny was turning, seeing who was coming. Neville saw Luna was with his brother, skipping along beside him, talking happily.

"We're going to finish this conversation later, Nev," Ginny told him firmly, her brown eyes capturing his. "Okay?"

The panic slammed back into his system and he stuttered, "O-ok-ay."

Together they turned and headed for the others. They were about fifty feet away when Neville calmed down enough to notice something wasn't right. Luna was doing all the talking. Shadow was walking slowly, his hand massaging his forehead. The closer they got, the paler Shadow looked. The previous anxiety took hold, but in a new way. Now the fear made Neville focused instead of panicked. He began to run.
"Neville?" Ginny called after him, confusion in her voice.

Shadow collapsed when Neville was still twenty feet away. Horrified, Neville watched as his brother began to seizure. He slid to Shadow's side on his knees. Ginny was screaming for help, Luna was humming something. Frantically, Neville yanked the potion Professor Snape had given him just yesterday out of his robe pocket.

Ginny had asked why he was wearing it over his jeans and T-shirt, even thrown casually open down the front as it was. He had answered that it made him more comfortable, that he was sensitive about his weight. The truth was he swore to have Shadow's potion on him at all times. Just in case. Thank Merlin, he had. Thank Merlin!

Cradling his brother's head, using all his strength to keep it still, he brought the vial to Shadow's lips. Suddenly, Luna was there opening Shadow's jaw and kneeling gently on his chest as the teen thrashed and shook violently. With the horrific sound of his brother's heels drumming against the ground, Neville poured the potion into Shadow's mouth and hurriedly rubbed at his throat. Some spilled out the corner of his mouth, began to froth at his lips. He wasn't sure if any of it was going down. Shadow was gurgling, choking.

"That is why it is important someone gets this into him while the seizure is relatively mild. However, if he cannot swallow, it will absorb through the oral skin, so at least make sure it stays in his mouth. It will not be as effective administered this way, so use both vials instead of one. Understood?" - Professor Snape's voice rose out of his memory.

Neville flung the empty vial away and reached for the second. His brother was choking! But Shadow couldn't be allowed to wake. Not at school. Not when there was a chance he could be Demon.

"Neville!" Ginny screamed. "What are you doing? He can't breathe!"

"He's fine. He's going to be fine," he yelled back, not even sure he was right.

Panting for breath, drenched with sweat from having to wrestle with Shadow's seizing body, he nonetheless forced the second vial into Shadow's mouth, producing more foaming spittle and hacking gurgles. Blood stained the dirt as Shadow's hands, elbows, and heels were scrapped and skinned as his limbs battered themselves against the ground. Neville clung to his brother, trying to calm the storm and failing.

"Get Professor Snape!" he bellowed up at his girlfriend. "HURRY!"

The seizure seemed to last an eternity, but not even ten minutes had passed when Shadow began to still. Breath shuddering through his lungs, Neville slowly released him. Shadow lay too still now. His chest barely moved up and down. His limbs were completely limp. There was no movement in his face or under his bruised eyelids. He looked dead.

With a trembling hand, Neville wiped away the spit and foam from his brother's mouth. He could hardly feel the soft puff of air as the teen exhaled.

"Shadow's okay now," Luna said happily. She knelt next to them and put a warm hand on Neville's shoulder. "Snorkacks would be here for sure if he weren't."

Neville curled forward over his brother's lifeless body and began to sob.

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Shadow hurt. Everything was sore, his throat ached, and his head felt like someone was hammering invisible nails into his skull. Cracking an eye open, he groaned in relief. Wherever he was, it was cool and dark. Gathering his strength, he managed to pry both eyes open. They were heavy and gummed, but he had to know where he was. Had to know he was safe before he could let go again. He felt like he was trying to climb out of a dark, slippery well.

Something was touching his hand. His fingers jerked with the realization and his heart began to beat faster. Who was touching him? Tilting his head, the room spun in his vision, making his eyes water as nausea rolled ominously through his guts. Blinking his vision clear, panicking as the hand tightened around his own, he made out someone's silhouette.

"Ahgm…" he croaked, trying to ask who was there.

A second shadowed figure moved in the background and came forward. A cup was placed at his mouth and he swallowed cold water. It felt heavenly against his abraded throat. It also seemed to wake him up a bit more. His eyes adjusted to the dinness and he recognized that it was Neville sitting at his bedside, holding his hand. The water-bearer was Severus. Both looked drawn and grim.

"Wha…" he asked weakly.

Neville smiled tearfully at him. "You're okay. Everything's okay."

Shadow weakly shook his head, needing to know what the hell was going on. Why was he so drained? Was he sick? What happened? The last thing he could remember… God, he couldn't remember anything! Panicking, he flailed and agony screamed along his nerves at the sudden movement.

"Be still," Severus warned, coming forward and placing a hand on Shadow’s chest to enforce the command. "You have been in a coma for about seven hours now. It is almost midnight."

The information was startling, but his father's tone was even and smooth, the deep familiar voice calming him. He stilled and allowed his heart rate to calm. He took deep breaths and allowed the pain to subside into a dull throbbing. Then he tried again. "Wha… hap…?"

Neville shared a look with Severus but answered. "You were walking out to the lake with Luna. You had a seizure. I was able to give you the potion in time. We've been waiting for you to wake up."

The lake… He didn't remember going to the lake, but… Luna… A vague memory of Luna coming for him… in the kitchen while he was with… Rogan and the others. More memories of that Saturday came back to him. He relaxed further, comforted that everything was all right. He hadn't been attacked. He was safe here with his father and Neville.

Chapter end.
Facing Your Fears

Severus sipped at his tea. He stood in the doorway of his bedroom, staring at his child sleeping cocooned in soft sheets. Longbottom had left around two o'clock that morning. It was now nearing ten. The day before had been traumatizing for all of them. Coming upon Shadow lying deathly still, heart barely beating, Longbottom crying over him, he had felt like his own soul would shatter into a million pieces.

He thought such grief was beyond him once Amalia and his daughter were taken from him, but he had experienced a taste of it once again yesterday. And it terrified him. Thank the gods, Shadow hadn’t died. He was safe inside Severus’s own quarters.

Poppy had come twice to check him over. Physically Shadow merely suffered mild to severe sprains and a few abrasions, but she hadn't felt comfortable administering any Healing spells or potions with the Anesthetic Potion still in his system. She had been doubtful Shadow would ever shake free of it; she hadn’t want to further complicate things.

The sound of soft rustling reached his ears. Severus was already moving forward as Shadow groaned painfully and opened his strange eyes. They were clearer this morning than they had been last night. This time they focused instantly on Severus and a small smile touched his son's face. Suppressing the sudden surge of relief and fear that overwhelmed him, Severus gently brushed black curls back from the teen’s pale face.

"How do you feel?"

"Like I was hit by a truck."

Shadow tried to sit up, but he didn't have the strength. Severus was quick to help him. Together they managed to get him sitting against the headboard. Severus pretended not to notice the gritted teeth and occasional sharp gasps. When Shadow was settled comfortably, Severus reached for his barely touched cup of tea and gave it to him.

"I'm going to fire call Poppy. She will be able to inform us if pain potions are safe now," he murmured softly, noticing the tightness around Shadow’s eyes that indicated his son had a headache on top of the pain of his body.

“Thanks.” Shadow smiled as he sipped the lukewarm tea.

Feeling bolstered by the sugar and caffeine, he managed to get through Madam Pomfrey's extensive tests without a word of complaint, although he did pull a face several times to indicate he thought she was going overboard. Severus stood sentinel over the proceedings, silent and watchful.

"Well," Poppy said crisply, finally relenting an hour later. "The results are positive. The potion you administered is out of his system, but has left his immune system suppressed. I went ahead and healed the sprains he has suffered. He'll still feel achy for a couple days. Mild pain potions are acceptable when needed. I've also spelled him with an immune booster." She glared sternly into her patient's eyes. "Do not overwork yourself for the next week, young man, or you'll be bedridden with a bad case of pneumonia. You do remember your godfather's condition a year ago, do you not?"

Shadow gasped, his hands clutching the bed sheets under him.
Severus stepped forward quickly to reassure him. "Poppy had to be told who you really were and become acquainted with your injuries and healing over this summer. She would have known the truth after giving you a physical in Grimmauld Place in any case. We've made her swear an oath of secrecy. She is safe."

"Really," Poppy huffed, crossing her arms in annoyance. "I am a mediwitch. All I care about is your health. This cloak and dagger bit does not interest me in the least, I assure you. You've been through a lot. Whether you're Harry Potter or Shadow Snape matters not one whit. Your body is fragile right now! I recommend you remember it!"

"Thank you, Poppy," Severus intervened. He gently guided the woman out of the room. "We will be careful, of course."

Shadow fumed silently as the two left him. The more people who knew his secret, the higher the chance that his enemies would learn of it, putting him in more danger. Danger he wasn't ready to face. He was still scowling when Severus came back.

Severus noticed his son's expression and smiled. Temper was so much better than the weak helplessness of last night. "I assure you Poppy will not disclose your information willingly or unwillingly. Trust me to know of what I speak," he assured the boy. He went to the potion cabinet in the corner and took out the mildest pain reliever he had. He brought it back, but Shadow didn't take it.

"You could have told me."

"Yes. I could have," Severus agreed, lowering his head in a faint nod.

"Why didn't you?" the teen demanded.

"To be honest, it slipped my mind. I guess I assumed you knew something like this would be inevitable."

Shadow sighed and relaxed. "I did see her expression after she ran my physical, and then Remus took her aside and talked to her privately afterward. So I guess I did know."

Severus gestured with his fingers as if to say 'Well, there you go.' He offered the potion again. Shadow took it and downed it in one gulp. As often as he took potions in his life, he could never reconcile himself to the awful taste. Grimacing, he put the vial aside and took up the glass of water, drinking thirstily.

"Are you hungry?" Severus asked, pleased with the disappearance of the pain lines around his son's eyes.

"Starving," Shadow admitted.

Severus nodded and went to floo the kitchen. They ate together in silence. With every bite, Shadow felt some strength returning. Enough that when they were done, he was strong enough to walk to the bathroom and soak for an hour in his special healing solution.

If he'd calculated correctly, this would be the last time. His scars would be as healed as they ever would be after this. He was relieved to have it over with one way or another, but what came after the bath was even more difficult, and, worse, he couldn't tell himself it would be over soon.

Bundled in his pajamas with a blanket wrapped around him and hot chocolate warming his hands, he sat on the couch and prepared for another grueling therapy session. Severus had offered to let them
postpone it for later that week, but as much as he hated it, Shadow hated being messed up more. He needed stability in his emotions, in his mind. As much as he hated to admit it, the therapy was helping. He had to keep pushing forward.

"Have you been thinking on relationships?" Severus asked mildly. His was face completely blank, he tucked his emotions away; they had no bearing here. As much as the father in him wanted to let Shadow rest, the therapist in him knew he could use this moment while Shadow’s resistance was low due to exhaustion and physical weakness to push him into a breakthrough. It most likely wouldn't be pretty, but Shadow had chosen to move forward.

Shadow closed his eyes. He had another choice to make. He could lie or he could tell the truth, but if he was going to do this, he might as well tell the truth. Avoidance would only drag this out and make Severus pull the information he wanted out bit by bit, so he took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

"Not really," he answered honestly with a shrug. "Not more than last time. Relationships are fine, but I don't particularly want one. It doesn't matter to me."

"It matters to you or the mere idea wouldn't cause such anxiety. So let's think about it now. What would you want from a relationship?"

"Nothing. I don't want one," Shadow answered easily, but his hands were beginning to sweat. He hated this.

"Okay," Severus allowed the dodge. "Why don't you want one?"

"Because…” Shadow bit out, eyes glowering at his father. He shook his head sharply and waved his hand.

Severus took the cue. His son wasn't quite ready to face that hurdle. He chose a different tactic. "Let's play a game," he suggested and ignored the derisive snort that came from Shadow. "Pretend for a moment. What would you want in a partner?"

"This is stupid," Shadow growled, deeply uncomfortable.

"Humor me. What would you appreciate in a partner?" Severus tilted his head forward to stare at his son intently and making it clear he was serious.

"Fine," Shadow sneered, disgusted. He flopped back against the couch and forced himself to relax a bit.

His eyes drifted to the fireplace, a frown crinkling his forehead. What would he want? Minutes stretched out in silence. Severus waited patiently, his legs crossed, his hands clasped on his knee. With a mumbled curse, Shadow realized he was fidgeting and he was getting more and more annoyed. Damn it! The thought of having a girlfriend made him want to scream and run away. He didn't want to think about what she would be like! But he had to if he was ever going to beat this thing haunting him!

"Independence. I wouldn't want to constantly take care of some dainty girl," he finally spoke, annoyance thick in his voice for this stupid exercise.

"What else?" Severus prodded.

Frustrated, he reluctantly thought of the people he loved. What qualities did he like in them? Surely that would help him answer his father's stupid questions. The image of Amalia rose in his heart with a deep painful longing. His hands clenched under the concealing blanket.
"Humor, I guess. The ability to laugh at things." He thought of Severus and said, "Intelligence and intuition; I wouldn't want to constantly be explaining stuff." He thought of Neville. "Loyalty. I wouldn't be with someone I couldn't trust." Suddenly the image of Draco popped in his head. His breath caught in his throat. Had he really accepted Draco so much? He wouldn't even say he loved Remus or Sirius. He liked them, yes. Trust them, definitely. He was fond of them, but love? Not yet. Close, but not yet. And here was Draco, holding space next to Neville, his brother, and Severus, his father and savior.

"What?" Severus asked shrewdly. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, forearms on his thighs. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," Shadow wheezed, trying to breathe again. His heart was rocketing in his chest and he felt cornered, but he wasn't sure why.

"It seems to me that you've listed very good qualities. If you happen to meet such a person, why would you refuse them?"

"I… because…" Shadow shook his head. He was feeling dizzy. "We were just playing your stupid game. That person isn't real."

"But if they were and you met them tomorrow…” Severus pressed ruthlessly, his black eyes unblinking on the glazed eyes of his son.

"That's… no…” Shadow leaned away. God, he couldn't think. "Wait… Just wait a minute…”

"If a person with such qualities, the qualities that you just described, came into your life and offered you a chance at the type of happiness you admitted came only with this type of relationship, would you let them in?"

"No," Shadow gasped. "No… The war… I can't…"

"And if the person that loved you made a choice to wait for you until after the war would you be with them then? Would you allow yourself to love them back?" Severus's words pressed him to the wall. There was no turning away.

"There is no such person!” Shadow yelled desperate. "It's not real."

"If it was," Severus insisted, demanding an answer. "If someone fell in love with you and satisfied the standards you have set, what then?"

"Then… I don't know!"

"Why not?"

Shadow leapt to his feet, but had nowhere to go. "I just… This is stupid… It doesn't matter… There's no one like that…”

"But if there were? If they were standing here right now?" Severus calmly gestured to the space between them.

"Impossible!” Shadow yelled, his face turning an angry red. "No one could love me like that! I just don't want anyone touching me, okay?"

"No," Severus said gently and put out his empty hands in a show of peace. "It's not okay, Shadow, but it will be."
Gasping, Shadow stumbled back, falling into the couch. He curled up and began to cry, deep emotional sobs that wracked his whole body. Embarrassed, he covered his face with the blanket. Severus let him regain his composure and fetched the mild pain potion that Shadow was allowed to take. When the teen was strong enough to poke his head out of the blanket, Severus handed it over, face still neutral. This wasn't over yet.

Shadow took the potion with trembling hands, fat teardrops still clinging to his long dark lashes. He looked younger than his age, worn down and vulnerable, his formidable barriers temporarily overcome.

"The problem here is your belief that no one could 'love you like that', as you said," Severus spoke calmly. He leaned back in his armchair and hooked his greasy hair behind his ears. "Is it that you do not think you are worthy of it? Or a sense that no one could ever understand you? Or is it something else?"

"I don't know," Shadow rasped. "Just… Just give me a minute to think."

"Answer off the top of your head," Severus insisted. "If I give you time to think, you'll come up with something less truthful."

"It's not that I don't feel worthy, like I'm not good enough or something." Shadow shook his head helplessly, fingers white where they clutched the blanket up around his neck. "It's just… all the stuff I've been through. With my Dissociative Identity Disorder, Lockhart, Dark Lords, Demon and Boy… It's too much, you know? It's almost too much for me, let alone someone who doesn't have to deal with it if they don't want to. And who would? Want to, I mean."

"So you feel no one would care enough about you to deal with the difficulties you embody?"
Severus clarified. Despite suppressing his emotions, he felt a pang of recognition at hearing that. He lowered his head, his hair curtaining his face. "I once felt the same," he admitted softly. His eyes came up and met his son's. "I want to tell you two things. I want you to really listen to me. Even if you can't understand or believe me right now, I want you to remember and think on what I'm about to tell you."

Shadow straightened and met his father's stare. He nodded, promising silently to do as he was asked.

"The first is this: People always find it easier to deal with problems that are not their own. The second is somewhat harder to accept. You cannot make anyone love you, and conversely you cannot stop someone from loving you."

Shadow memorized the words. He could feel the simple wisdom in them, but Severus was right. He didn't understand what it meant for him personally.

"I'd like to point out a few things you should think on as well," Severus continued, his tone lighter. "I can name five people who have a good grasp of what you've been through and understand what is still in the future. All of them have chosen to stay by your side regardless. That suggests to me that not only is it possible for someone to understand and love you anyway, it has already happened."

Shadow hooded his eyes, not wanting to follow that train of thought.

"Yes." Severus smiled. "That means it is likely that someone very well may fall in love with you in spite of the burdens you bear. A relationship is very possible." His expression turned more solemn as he touched on the more sensitive topic. "And I now better understand your disgust with the idea of becoming intimate with another person. If you truly believe no one could love you in that manner, then sex would be abhorrent to you. I don't believe intimacy will ever be attractive in a casual sense
for you, but I want you to consider how different it would be to be with someone to whom you are committed and who is equally committed to you."

Shadow shivered. "It's too much," he insisted weakly. "It's still too much. It wouldn't matter. I couldn't… I still couldn't…"

Severus watched as his son struggled desperately for a way to communicate the real fear he felt, a fear that was still not completely clear to Shadow. He took pity. "You couldn't make yourself that vulnerable to anyone else?"

Shadow thought about it, his expression pensive. "Kind of, but not quite. I mean, I'm vulnerable right now. I'm vulnerable with Neville sometimes, too. I admit that I hate it, but I do it. So… That's not it exactly."

Severus thought about it. He tried to think objectively, to place himself in Shadow's position. What would prevent him from not only being adverse to the idea of sex, but propel him into closing himself off to the idea of relationships completely? Rape was a very difficult emotional and physical trauma to deal with, but Shadow's situation was still more unique.

"Submission," Severus voiced tiredly. He closed his eyes, wishing it wasn't so. "To be with someone intimately, to be in a relationship with someone else, you have to submit to yourself as much as you have to submit to the other person. You have to let go and trust your emotions, ride the sensations. You are afraid to trust your feelings because they led you to be victimized."

Shadow's eyes went wide, the words resonating deeply in his soul. Severus was right. He was completely right. Tears spilled down his cheeks slowly and his mouth parted in a silent gasp. Oh, god. That was it exactly!

Severus couldn't take it anymore. He rose and sat next to his child, pulling him into his side.

Shadow allowed it and rested his head on the strong shoulder. Shivering, certain he was going to be sick, he confessed the truth, "I thought… I thought I had accepted that it wasn't my fault, that Kit couldn't help it… but I guess I haven't. Remus helped me see that touch and physical comfort was good, so I took her back, but I never really accepted that some part of me… any part of me…” His hands were shaking violently now and Severus clasped them in his own to still them. "…what Lockhart was doing…” Shadow had to swallow hard to keep the bile from rising in his throat. "…no matter how good sex is supposed to feel, how could I not recognize - no matter who I was at the time! - how wrong that was?" It was too much. He couldn't take anymore tonight. Shadow pulled away, trying to escape it all.

Severus saw the withdrawal, the hysteria, and held firm. He had to say something now or the idea of being damaged and at fault would fester deeper. "Listen to me!" he snapped. "You have a mental condition. It's nothing to take lightly. Lockhart manipulated that to indulge his own sick desires. Kit may have borne the abuse because she was best able to handle it, but she never sought attention like that on her own! Never! She was reactive not proactive. She was a coping device that went awry, under no fault of your own!"

Shadow struggled to yank free of Severus’s grasp.

He held tighter and raised his voice to be sure he was heard. "Most importantly! Kit may have thought all was well and it was good, but parts of you knew even then that it was wrong. Boy went haywire and only because Kit was anchored was she able to resist the alter of pain and despair to come forth. Really think about that! Even as Kit, you knew deep down that what was happening was wrong. You can trust in that!"
Yanking away from his father, Shadow stumbled blindly across the room. He made it to the bedroom and slammed the door.

Severus stood, but he made no move to go after him. Now was the time to let Shadow work things out in his own mind. He let his own emotions go as he sat tiredly on the couch.

As a child, his biggest hope for the future was that it would someday be easier. That Hogwarts would be easier than his abusive home. It wasn't. That being a Death Eater would somehow make up for all the pain and humiliation he had suffered. It hadn't. Turning spy was even more difficult than being a loyal Death Eater. The only thing easy in his life had been loving Amalia and their daughter, but that was merely a set up for the most difficult time of his life yet: learning how to live without them.

His life had been filled with bitterness when Harry Potter came into his life. Hating his enemy's son had become rather difficult. Finally loving him as his own was no less so. Severus just prayed he had the strength to continue facing each new day without faltering.

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As the day wore on, Neville and Draco both stopped by to see how Shadow was doing. Severus assured them their friend was fine and sent them on their way. Shadow still hadn't come out of the bedroom. It wasn't until dinner that the door finally cracked open and a head of curly black hair poked out. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face was groggy from sleep. Severus gestured for him to come out. Shadow did so with reluctance.

They had dinner together. It was quiet and companionable, but there was still a heaviness in the air. What they needed was a good distraction. Severus was going to suggest a game of chess when Salazar materialized beside the table. Not exactly the distraction he had in mind - Salazar's information was bound to be unpleasant - but it would have to do.

"What? Not happy to see me?" the phantom mocked, a sneer on his face.

"I sincerely hope you had nothing to do with that seizure," Severus growled, eyes filling with deadly intent. "Castle or not, I will make you hurt if you were the cause."

Shadow lifted an eyebrow. He had not considered that before. He turned and looked expectantly at the phantom.

"To be honest, Shadow has been on the edge of a seizure for days now. It was going to come sooner or later," the phantom huffed. He lifted his hand and put his forefinger and thumb closer together. "I may have pushed it into happening sooner, but the seizure itself was not my fault! I swear!"

"Was it worth it, ghost?" Severus asked icily. "Do you know how to keep the Dark Lord from my son's mind?"

Salazar eagerly accepted the change of subject. "Technically Shadow is doing that himself. The Dark Lord can't get through Shadow's Occlumency even if he tried, which he's not doing. The Dark Lord's barricading his mind, as well. He fears Harry Potter. He's not interested in tempting fate and allowing their minds to connect."

"Explain the dreams then," Shadow snorted and crossed his arms. "I am not doing that on purpose!"

"Neither is the Dark Lord." Salazar smirked. "We are all aware that Shadow has a seascape to represent his mental terrain, right? Well, Shadow's Occlumency shields take the form of opaque/mirrored glass. Like an exhibit at the zoo. I must add that I'm impressed with their strength.
I've never seen shields stronger."

Shadow growled impatiently, not caring one wit about the damn phantom's approval.

Salazar held up a hand to prevent the teen and the glowering Potion Master from interrupting. "However! There is a lightning bolt-shaped crack in one of the glass panels. Usually, it is protected and covered with seaweed, but when Shadow's mind is asleep the patch disintegrates. That shouldn't matter because the Dark Lord has his side blocked, so the bond is still inactive."

"But it does matter," Severus snarled. "Obviously the boy is still having visions."

"Not visions," Salazar said smugly. He crossed his arms and smirked at the two angry Snipes. "Dreams. Shadow's been having dreams. When it so happens that the Dark Lord and Shadow are sleeping at the same time, the bond activates and their subconscious minds work together to weave a dream that they both share. Basically, some images in the dream will be from the Dark Lord, other images will be from Shadow. There will be clues to both of their mindsets embedded in the dream. It's all in the matter of correctly interpreting which parts, images, and feelings come from whom."

"How. Do. We. Stop. It?" Severus bit out.

"Can't do more than you're already doing." Salazar shook his head. "Seriously. Unless Shadow has someone else in his mind while he sleeps to guard the crack for him, it's not going to happen."

Severus growled.

"Look," the phantom said to defend himself, "Shadow didn't know the Dark Lord had anything to do with his dreams. They felt like his own. Not like the visions before. It wasn't until he realized the Dark Lord was back that he thought they might be from there. The Dark Lord most likely was never aware of Shadow getting visions in the first place. He'll think the dreams are his own. The shared dreams won't hurt Shadow."

"I'm strangely okay with doing nothing," Shadow spoke up, his anger faded. He hadn't wanted to stop the dreams to begin with. He just didn't want Voldemort to be able to look in his mind as well. "If Tom ever finds out about the connection and tries to use it, I will know. Salazar said I can keep him out on my own when I'm awake. Sounds fine to me."

Severus jerked to his feet, bent over with hands splayed on the table. A furious retort was on the tip of his tongue about how idiotic this blasé acceptance was, but he held it back. There wasn't anything to be done. The connection between the Dark Lord and his son was unique. He had looked in every book imaginable and found nothing. Salazar was his one hope. The founder's phantom knew what he was doing when it came to the mind, no matter how evil scientist he was about it. He'd have to trust the Salazar's judgment and his son's. Severus still hated it, but he took a deep breath and straightened with a nod.

"Good," Salazar said with a wide grin. "I have one more thing to bring to your attention."

The Snipes returned their attention to him reluctantly, both with hooded eyes.

Ignoring that, Salazar continued. "I've been observing Boy for about thirty hours. I think I can help heal his psyche somewhat. I'm not saying I can cure him, but I can at least get Boy to how he was before the torture in the graveyard, if not slightly more functional."

"Why would I care about that?" Shadow shrugged, uninterested.

"What would this cure entail?" Severus asked suspiciously.

"Boy is still a part of your soul and psyche, whether you want to admit it or not. Divorcing yourself from him as if you have nothing to do with the alter is delusional," Severus answered coolly. He agreed the two alters were too damaged to integrate at the moment, but that did not mean he approved of forgetting Boy and Demon completely. They couldn't be thrown in a mental closet and ignored.

Shadow crossed his arms and pouted.

Satisfied with that for now, Severus returned his attention to the phantom. "Well?"

"It won't hurt a thing," Salazar coaxed. "Just let me stay inside his mind for a bit. When my preliminary work is done, Boy will need to come Out for a couple of hours a few times a week to finish. That's it."

"Is that all?" Shadow drawled sarcastically. He stood and poked his finger in the solid-feeling chest. "I don't want you living in my head! You said yourself it's stressful for my psyche or whatever!"

"You didn't notice I was there, did you?" Salazar scowled, rubbing his chest.

"I had a migraine all day!" Shadow protested.

"Probably due to the oncoming seizure. Nothing to do with me!" Salazar argued.

"Oh, the seizure you brought on, you mean?"

"Boys!" Severus finally cut in. He glared at them both. "Try to be more mature, please. Let's discuss this." He stared at them thoughtfully for a moment before realizing neither intended to speak. Sighing, Severus looked at Salazar. "What exactly would you be doing to Boy while within Shadow's mind?"

"Basically, I'll be going inside the mind of a mind," the phantom answered, a spark of enthusiasm in his eyes. "I've seen cases like Boy's and I've been able to help greatly with them. I think it will work here as well. The first thing I will do is slowly and carefully weaken his memory recall ability, but specifically geared to negative emotions. It puts suffering into proportion, allowing the person to compartmentalize and look beyond the bad. Once that is done, I will alter his sense of time and get him to make new positive memories, memories and feelings that will feel longer and older than they really are. It isn't really a complete cure. There will still be psychological scarring, but it will make him more functional."

Severus turned his gaze to Shadow. "What do you think?"

"I think it's going to suck and I don't see why I should bother," Shadow said stubbornly, glaring into his father's eyes.

"I think it's worth a try. Salazar is an expert and he is at a further advantage due to his lack of physical being," Severus said calmly. "We can stop it at any time, right?" He shot a look at the ghost.

"Yes, of course. I can only do what I have permission for," Salazar huffed and rolled his eyes.

Severus nodded. "It might not be a bad idea to test the theory."

"I don't get a say in the matter?" Shadow glared, about ready to hex the man.
"You do," Severus crossed his arms. "It's your permission Salazar needs, not mine. I was just expressing my opinion."

"Yeah, right," Shadow sneered. He sighed and looked down at the table. At his hands. At the wood. None of it was helping him. He looked up at the phantom. "Fine. But only when I'm asleep. And if I say no more, then you stop and you don't come back again unless summoned."

"Understood!" Salazar saluted mockingly before disappearing.

"I'm going back to the common room," Shadow said and moved toward the door.

"Think about what I said concerning Kit," Severus called after him.

Shadow tensed but didn't stop or turn around.

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Over the next week, Shadow hated to admit it, but he didn't sense Salazar messing around with Boy while he slept. In fact, he slept deeply and without dreams. That might have been due in part to working hard all day and playing the piano at night until he was exhausted. Draco usually sat with him during these late night jam sessions. The blond hovered more than usual, worried about another seizure.

Remus returned on Wednesday and was very upset to learn about the episode. The werewolf ran Shadow through all the medical tests again, but it was worth the annoyance. Remus told them that he didn't think there would be another seizure. The magic healing his body was done, the balance was finally restored.

Not only that, but most of his scars were gone, as well. Only the worst ones - the one that ran the length of his right forearm and one that curved delicately from his left hip bone to his mid-back - were left at all, and even they were very faint white lines. Of course, he still had the lightning bolt scar on his chest, but that didn't really count since it was a curse scar.

As for Umbridge, she was trapped in her rooms until Thursday. She had Ministry healers coming and going at all hours, but none could help her. It wasn't until she fasted that she realized that whatever was making her allergic to sunlight was being put in her food and drinks. Now she didn't trust Hogwarts' kitchen and ordered all her meals and drinks from Hogsmeade.

Cured, she resumed teaching DADA class. More students than ever were given detentions and she docked more points from them than even Severus did. Shadow, himself, earned a detention for the following Monday for writing in short-hand when she ordered them to copy the fifth chapter of their books into their notes verbatim.

Shadow met with the twins that weekend to plan the next prank. It was going to be great! He even invited Luna to help. He hadn't forgotten that she had helped him last Saturday. To thank her, he fetched a pebble from the lake and wrapped it up in shiny paper. She took the gift gratefully and treated it as if it were a diamond, making the twins laugh hysterically, but for Luna, the simple gift was as precious as a jewel because it was the first one she had received from anyone except her father in a long time.

"Thank you for helping me and Neville," Shadow said softly. He took her small hand in his and squeezed. She reminded him painfully of being at the Dursley's. He hadn't been understood there or got presents, either. "I really appreciate it, Luna."

"Yeah, thanks," Fred said with a grin, draping an arm around her neck. She blinked up at him with
slightly unfocused eyes.

George came up on her other side and put his arm around her waist. "We need all the help we can get, watching out for this guy."

Luna nodded with a happy smile. "Sometimes it takes many eyes to see through the shadows."

Shadow laughed. He was glad the twins got on so famously with the strange girl. Luna deserved to have some friends, and he couldn't think of better or more faithful friends than the twins.

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He'd had enough! Neville had been avoiding him all week. After the shy Gryffindor had asked if Shadow was okay when they had run into each other in the halls on Monday, his brother had been conspicuously absent. Shadow hadn't even seen him at meals. In Transfiguration, Neville was the last to arrive and the first to leave.

Sunday after dinner, Shadow excused himself from the common room, saying he was tired. He grabbed his invisibility cloak and the map and went in search of his wayward brother. He was only mildly surprised to find him in the courtyard where he practiced his Earth Magic. His lessons with Madigan were every Wednesday, so Neville wasn't in the middle of a lesson; therefore Shadow didn't bother to knock as he pushed open the door and stepped outside under a cloudless, late September sky.

The air was cool enough that Shadow was glad he had pulled on a sweater. There was hardly enough light to see by, the moon waning into New. He silently stepped along the path until he came upon a bench beside a fir tree. Neville was sitting, hunched over. He wasn't making any noises. He was alone. Satisfied, Shadow threw off the cloak and approached. He didn't see the blade until they were almost within touching distance.

"Nev?" he asked softly, eyes wide.

The Gryffindor looked up. He didn't seem surprised to see Shadow standing there. Looking closely, he saw that Neville hadn't cut yet, but there was something in Neville's eyes that screamed how much he longed to. Taking a deep breath, Shadow opened his empathy a bit and was shocked by the depression that was rolling off his brother.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stepping closer and thinking of grabbing the razor blade.

"Pathetic, I know."

"Pathetic, I know." Neville laughed bitterly. He offered the knife. Shadow took it and put it in his pocket, keeping it out of sight. Neville sighed at that. He looked away, tears filling his eyes; his acidic shame burned the back of Shadow's throat. "I didn't use it. I just sit out here and look at it."

"Why?"

"Why?" Shadow asked. He sat on the ground, his back to the bench leg so that Neville didn't feel like he was staring at him.

"It's nothing," Neville answered. He lifted his head and stared up at the stars. The Slytherin had enough to deal with and Neville felt guilty as hell for adding to it.

"Come on." Shadow pushed his leg. "We've been through this. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be. I'm fine, and if you don't tell me what's wrong, it'll only worry at me."

With a deep sigh, Neville confessed softly, "Ginny and I broke up."

"What?" Shadow sat straight and stared at his brother in shock. "What happened?"
"I couldn't tell her about… him, you know?" Neville looked down at his brother. His round face filled with an almost non-existent hope that Shadow would know what to say to make this better.

"I…" Shadow blinked, almost numb with shock. "She asked about it? How?"

"She could tell something was up. I… I'm kind of - I don't know - hesitant, when it comes to kissing and stuff." Neville squirmed, very uncomfortable. He jumped to his feet and began to walk along the path to distract himself.

Shadow stared after him for a moment before getting to his feet to follow. He felt way out of his depth. Coming up along his brother, he asked carefully, "Have you tried talking to Remus about this? I'm sure he'd know how to help."

"I know what he'd say," Neville dismissed. His shoulders slumped despondently, realizing Shadow couldn't help him. "He'd tell me to tell her about it… I miss her, Shadow. She's been avoiding me, and when she has to be near me she acts like we're just friends. It really hurts."

"I'm sorry," Shadow said helplessly, shifting his weight on his feet, wishing there was something he could do. "I don't really know what you should do. I… I'm having my own trouble with this. In fact, I'm a few steps behind you. I should be asking for your advice, not the other way around."

"What do you mean?" Neville looked at him doubtfully.

Shadow gritted his teeth and briefly outlined the problems that had come clear in therapy. Neville listened. They ended up back at the bench under the fir. The only good thing about going over Shadow's problems was that Neville's depression shifted into focused concern and sympathy.

"I was shocked Ginny liked me," Neville said, offering understanding. "I wouldn't have talked to her if it wasn't for you. I felt I was dirty, I guess, damaged. I know that's different from what you feel, but I understand how hard it is."

"All I'm trying to say is that I can't imagine having a girlfriend, let alone telling said girlfriend about what happened." Shadow sighed, tugging at his curls. "You're ahead of me on this one, brother."

"I think you're not so far behind as you think," Neville said thoughtfully. "I think if you fall in love with someone, you'll be able to trust them even if you can't trust yourself. I mean, you never trusted L-L-Lockhart, but maybe you can trust someone else. Like I trust Ginny…” Neville trailed off, feeling understanding bloom. He trusted Ginny. He honestly trusted her. Maybe he wasn't ready to tell her everything, but he could tell her he'd been hurt. He could tell her that much. She deserved that much.

Shadow smiled, feeling the awe sweep across his brother's emotions. "Looks like you didn't need help. You just needed to talk about it." He reached over and hit the Gryffindor gently on the back of the head. "Next time don't avoid me, all right?"

"Yeah." Neville smiled. "What about you?"

Shadow shrugged. "I don't think I could trust someone that much, but maybe you're right. It might be easier to deal with if the girlfriend wasn't imaginary."

"The concept of someone loving you is hard to grasp, but what about you loving someone else? Can you imagine that?" Neville asked.

Shadow thought about it. That had never been the focus in therapy. After a moment, he answered, "I guess I could. As a friend or family, like I have already. I still can't imagine… lusting after someone."

"I'm sorry," Shadow said helplessly, shifting his weight on his feet, wishing there was something he could do. "I don't really know what you should do. I… I'm having my own trouble with this. In fact, I'm a few steps behind you. I should be asking for your advice, not the other way around."
"I can't either," Neville admitted. "It's not lust with Ginny, though. It's something different."

Shadow stared at his brother, filled with the other boy’s feelings as Neville thought about the girl he loved. The warmth, the tenderness, the aching affection, and something else. A longing that Shadow couldn't understand, wasn't sure he wanted to. He wasn't sure if he could ever trust that kind of feeling. It was deceiving, hormonal, and not based on reality. Some people could make it work, others couldn't.

Sensing his distress, Neville shifted the conversation. "How's Slytherin House? We write with the parchment, but it's never too specific. What's it really like?"

Shadow shook his head, pulling out of his dark thoughts. "I like Rogan. He's a natural leader and he's smart, you know? Miles is very shy. Like you were, I guess, but Rogan looks out for him. Lillian is all spitfire. She loves to argue and she's incredibly quick to anger and equally quick to laugh. You never know which you're going to get with her."

Their conversation continued in this manner. Shadow spoke about his plans to unite the Houses, his prank war against Umbridge, and his and Draco's idea about a defense group so that the students would know how to fight when the war came to Hogwarts' doors.

Neville told him about Gryffindor House. How Hermione was looking drawn, but was more determined than ever to stand up against Umbridge and how Ron and Lavender were beginning to make eyes at each other.

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Umbridge was walking to breakfast, still coldly furious about the week and a half she had been forced to remain in her quarters because someone poisoned her food! She didn't know who was responsible, so they were all going to pay for it. Heels clicking ominously on the stone floor, robes gently rippling, fake curls bouncing, Dolores Umbridge walked through the Great Hall doors and regally made her way to her seat. The students grew hushed as they watched her pass.

"Dolores," McGonagall said softly when the High Inquisitor finally took her seat.

"Minerva." Umbridge smiled, blue eyes regarding her suspiciously.

"You have paper stuck to the bottom of your shoe," the Headmistress told her kindly.

Flushed red with rage, she nonetheless was able to grit out a tight, "Thank you." Umbridge bent down and ripped the offending toilet paper from her shoe, unknowingly activating the charm that was amplified by a layered runic spell that had been woven into the thin paper sheet. For the rest of the day, any and all books would not open in the same room as her. She couldn't open her notes, students couldn't read from the chapters she assigned, nothing bound would come open.

"I want to know who is behind all these pranks," Umbridge demanded.

The fifth year Gryffindors shared meaningful glances, but none spoke up.

Umbridge smiled at them. "Don't be afraid. I will make sure the miscreants are dealt with. However, if you know something and don't say what you know, I'm afraid you can be considered an accomplice and will be punished as if you committed the crime yourself. Nobody wants that, do they?"

Hermione sat rigidly straight and didn't bother glancing around to see how her classmates reacted to this threat. She stared stonily forward and the other Gryffindors watched her quiet defiance and
straightened at their own desks. The class kept silent.

Furious enough to spit nails, Umbridge stomped to her desk and yanked open a drawer. Inside were a dozen Silence Binding Blood Quills. She handed a quill to each student after giving them one more chance to tell her who the prankster was. Hermione paled, but none of the other students realized what they were being given. Had they known, they might have said something, but thinking they were just going to do a few lines, they said nothing about the twins.

"All right everybody." Umbridge stood in front of the class, her hands clasped in front of her as her cold blue eyes ran over their ranks. "I know you know who is at fault and your silence is the equivalent of a lie. How about writing 'I will not tell lies' one hundred times. Then we will see if anyone knows something or not."

As the first line was carved into their hand, the class exclaimed in horror and shock, their blood shimmering on their parchment. Only Hermione continued to write. Everyone else stared at their teacher in horror.

Umbridge smiled out at them with honest delight. "These are very special quills. They are Blood Quills, cursed to bind a silencing spell to your blood to prevent you from speaking about them to anyone. You will do your lines - all one hundred - or the quill will write them for you…” She paused for effect. "…Double the amount I have assigned."

True to her words, after remaining still for too long, the quill jerked from the teenagers' hands and began to write on their own at a furious inhuman pace.

Lavender and Parvati screamed in pain and would have fallen out of their seats had their hands not been magically pinned to the desk. Dean and Ron bellowed, grabbing the wrists of their injured hands and trying to pull free with all their might. Only Seamus snatched the quill back to take over writing at a pace more tolerable.

"I suggest you do your own writing," Umbridge told the girls, Dean, and Ron with mock concern. "That looks rather painful."

The four scrambled for the frantic quill. Tears and blood flowed from them freely. They began writing, faces pale and eyes wide.

"You won't get away with this," Hermione spoke calmly, her quill moving evenly across the page. Practice made perfect, after all.

"And whom will you tell?" Umbridge asked sweetly.

Hermione glared. "We don't know anything."

"We shall see." Umbridge sighed contentedly, looking out at the pained class.

No one noticed Neville and the devastation on his face as he felt the first pain of the cut. He had thought about cutting all week, obsessed and fantasized over it, but at the same time he knew it was an addiction, an illness, that he had worked hard to overcome. As much as he wanted to use his razor, he was afraid to make the first cut. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop again.

No one in the class saw his expression melting into a shamed fascination. It felt so good. At first it was a shock, but then the familiar sting, the hypnotic sight of light shimmering off the ruby liquid, it came back to him like he had never stopped. He sank into the embrace of numbing pain and slowly his thoughts disappeared. All he was, everything that existed, was the gentle sting and throb, the tranquil shimmer.
By the end of the class, a serene smile curled his lips as he calmly wrote his lines. He was aware of no one. He walked the halls to his next class mechanically wrapped in a warm cocoon of detached serenity.

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Umbridge also grilled the following two groups of that day: the seventh year Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff class and sixth year Slytherin/Gryffindor class. She again demanded to be told who was guilty for the pranks being played on her. No one said a word. At first it was because they saw no reason to give her anything. Then when she forced them to do lines with the blood quills, they wouldn't tell her anything out of spite. Slytherins especially resented being tortured. It was a stupid and short-lived gambit that earned no respect from them; they reacted better to bribes.

Umbridge was almost glad. For the first time since she had come to Hogwarts, she felt happy. Watching all those wretched children cry and tremble was almost worth what she had suffered. She would find out who had attacked her. A couple classes like this and someone would tell her what she wanted to know.

By nightfall, she was in a great mood that promised only to get better. She was ready for her true prey. Umbridge sat at her desk, staring at the door expectantly, when it finally opened and Shadow Snape entered. The boy looked calm and undisturbed. She'd see how long that lasted. Smiling, viciously excited, she gestured toward the student desk in the corner. He sat and looked up at her with his Cursed eyes. She hid a shiver of unease and approached him with her most sickeningly sweet smile.

"I'm sure you've heard about my difficulty today," she inquired gently.

"No, ma'am." Shadow shook his head, blinking innocently. He had no idea what she had done to her classes. He wasn't scheduled to have his own DADA class until tomorrow. "Have more people used short-hand to copy their texts?"

"No." She sighed dramatically. "It seems books are charmed to lock shut in my presence."

"That's awful." Shadow frowned. "What are we going to do in class then?"

"I will think of something." Umbridge grinned, baring her shark-like teeth, "Due to this temporary disruption, I have something new in mind for your detention." She raised her wand as if she were going to summon something from her desk. With surprising quickness, she slashed it sideways, aimed at the startled teen. "Petrificus Totalus!"

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"Neville?"

Ginny walked across the common room, worry in her face. Neville sat on a couch near the fireplace and was staring blankly at the dancing flames. He turned his head slowly at her call. For a second, she was worried he didn't recognize her. She watched as he scratched absently at the back of his right hand. A lot of people were doing that, but their hands looked fine to her.

"Nev?"

Neville blinked a few times, coming out of his daze. It had just been so long since he felt this numb and warm. He didn't want to leave it, but he had wanted to tell Ginny something, hadn't he? Slowly he remembered his all-nighter in the courtyard. He remembered the discovered depths of his trust for the redhead staring down at him worriedly. Remembering also brought back the humiliation and
disgust, the absolute fear and smothering shame. He didn't want to feel those things anymore! He scratched harder at the scabs on his hand.

"Neville, something's going on, but no one will talk about it. Ron's acting really strange," Ginny explained. "What's happened?"

Neville shook his head. He literally couldn't say. Wasn't sure he even wanted to because he secretly liked the lines, the horrible quill. Merlin! Tears burned his eyes as he really listened to his own thoughts. He wasn't this weak! Not anymore. With painful effort, Neville forced his hands apart and met the eyes of the girl he loved.

"I want to, but I can't. Ginny, I can't!" He said, referring to cutting. He couldn't allow himself to fall back into this. He had to stop it!

"Can't?" Ginny glared angrily, misunderstanding. "Or won't? I don't understand why you won't talk to me! This is my brother! I thought you'd understand that!"

For the first time in their relationship, Neville got angry back. He jumped to his feet and grabbed her wrist, his brown eyes blazing with fury. "You don't understand! I get that it's not your fault, but could you try to be a little less blind? I can't tell you what's wrong. Literally. At least, not what's wrong with the others, but you want to know what's wrong with me? Fine! Fine, Ginny!" he yelled into her startled face. "I have an addiction to cutting. I'm trying to avoid falling back into that addiction and this stress isn't helping, Gin! You're not helping me by pushing!"

"Nev…" she gasped. "I…"

"No! Listen to me now!" he cried, voice beginning to tremble and his anger giving way to desperation. "You accused me of not trusting you. Well, what about trusting me? I wouldn't keep something from you for the fun of it, Gin. Obviously this is hard. Obviously what's wrong with me is something bigger than I can deal with, but I do trust you. I trust you, Ginny. So I'm going to tell you something. Something you're going to regret knowing. Something I had wished very hard you would never know about me."

"Nev…" Ginny protested, trying to pull her wrist away, certain it would be bruised, and beginning to fear whatever it was that was happening.

Neville stared blindly at her. His face crumpled with pain, his brown eyes wide. He was panting and his voice sunk to a whisper that Ginny had to lean in to hear. "I was hurt. Okay? Someone…" He closed his eyes, gasping for breath he couldn't find, unconsciously squeezing Ginny's wrist tighter. He didn't hear her gasp of pain. "… Did things with me when I didn't… I didn't want it!"

His eyes flew open and were filled with so much pain that Ginny forgot about her own. All she could feel was shame for pushing Neville the way she had and horrified that a person would hurt Neville that way. Crying himself, Neville released her wrist and fled from the room.

Ginny was too shocked to follow. She tried, but she tripped over her own feet and fell to the floor. She began to cry, cradling her wrist. How could she be so selfish? So clueless to her boyfriend's pain? Disgusted with herself, she sat there and cried until her friends found her and brought her back to their dorm room. They wanted to get one of her brothers, but she told them not to. She couldn't face anyone right now. She needed to think. She had to make it up to Nev. She had to make things better. Somehow.

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Shadow jerked as the spell hit him, freezing him instantly in place.

"That's better," Umbridge practically cooed. "I want you to sit still for what I have in mind. Wouldn't want you to leave before the show was over."

She walked crisply over to her bookcase. On the bottom shelf, she removed a shrunken trunk. Shadow could only move his eyes as the wretched bitch brought it over to him and unshrunk it at his feet. His magic was combating her spell. In thirty seconds or less, he'd be free and Umbitch was going to pay for attacking him.

"I want you to really pay close attention, Mr. Snape," Umbridge said sternly, wagging her finger at him. "Things could be so much worse for your father than this will be for you if I tell the Minister that Severus is acting suspiciously. Do you understand me? I'm doing this for your benefit. I'm trying to help you understand the seriousness of disrespecting the Ministry and her employees."

She flipped the lid open and rapidly stepped back. She watched avidly as the boggart rose from the depths of the trunk and settled before the frozen teenager. Shadow's eyes went wide in recognition and something akin to desperation swept though their glassy depths before the strangest thing happened. Umbridge looked closer. It had looked like all awareness had gone out of the teen's eyes, but before she could take a step forward, the teen jerked and the Petrificus shattered.

Umbridge raised her wand in fury, but before she could cast a spell, the teen screamed and flung himself hysterically backward, toppling his chair as he scrambled for the furthest corner. Umbridge went absolutely pale as the boggart elongated and took the form of a monstrous man with slitted, blood-red eyes. The tall, hairless man cackled and the laugh made goosebumps rise on her arms and neck.

Another figure split from the boggart. A grotesquely fat man, face twisted with rage, cracked the whip he held in his right hand. Sadistically, he twisted a bloody butcher knife that he held in his left hand so that it reflected light into the terrified eyes of the teen cowering at his feet. He was bellowing hateful words that hit the air with an almost physical impact.

The boy was screaming now, hoarse rasping screams, almost breathless with terror. Umbridge didn't know what she expected, but it wasn't this.

A third shape broke off from the two menacing figures already tormenting the child. Umbridge gasped with horror. A blond man was standing pant-less, his button-down shirt open down the middle. He was pumping his hand obscenely as he stared at the stricken boy with a disturbing lust.

The boy's terror was so great that Umbridge could smell it. She bolted from the room, a scream rising in her throat, infected by the unreasoning terror thick in her small office. The boggart fed off it, grew stronger with every passing second. The three figures became more real, more solid.

Vernon lifted the whip and prepared to strike.

Voldemort lifted his wand, bloodlust glowing in his eyes.

Lockhart was reaching for the teen, ready to pull him forward and finish what he had started.

"Riddikulus!" Draco intoned, his robes swirling around him. He couldn't exactly summon amusement, but indifference was just as deadly to a boggart.

Lockhart jerked and spun around, approaching the blond Slytherin who was wounding it. Draco was momentarily distracted as he watched his old teacher approach while gesturing him closer, grunting and moaning in pleasure, his other hand still working himself furiously as his lustful eyes ran over
Draco hungrily. Boy began to keen and Draco’s wand snapped up.

"Riddikulus!" he incanted, utterly revolted.

Lockhart exploded into black smoke that absorbed back into its other two forms.

Vernon turned and charged the blond, face ugly with murderous rage, but Draco was ready and he calmly incanted, "Riddikulus."

Again the figure exploded into black smoke. The last boggart turned and practically flew at the Slytherin. Draco faltered for just a moment, eyes wide, frightened despite himself as he stared into the monstrous features of the risen Dark Lord.

"Riddikulus!"

Voldemort flinched back. The incantation wasn't as strongly meant as the others. The nasty boggart was merely wounded, but Draco found his humor, watching the great and almighty Dark Lord flinch back from such a silly word. Laughing, he cast it again. Voldemort exploded and faded away like a shadow struck through with sunlight.

Shaking with adrenaline, Draco turned his attention to his best friend. He had never seen Boy or Demon with his own eyes before. He wished he still had that ignorance. Boy stared up at him with impossibly large eyes. Eyes that were painfully innocent and horribly frightened. Draco could see the teen trembling like a spooked horse. Boy was sobbing, still breathing erratically, and clutching the wall behind him as if it would grant him some kind of protection.

"Hey. It's all right," Draco tried. It hurt more than he could ever say to see his friend like this. "They're gone. It's okay. I got rid of them…"

Boy shuddered and gasped, heart pounding against his ribs. Slowly memories seeped into his terror-soaked mind as the person talked to him softly. He recognized that voice, that face. Then he remembered and gasped, eyes getting impossibly wider. "Boy…" he rasped tearfully, his body relaxing marginally. "Boy… like me…"

Draco's words stuttered to a halt and he just stared at the other teen. He had been told that Boy wasn't capable of speech or rational thought any longer.

"You hurt… like Boy…" the teen babbled. His painfully clear eyes were pinned to the Slytherin, wary of sudden moves. "You Boy, you hurt… Boy like Boy…"

“Yeah.” Draco swallowed, crouching down so they were at eye level. "I'm a boy like you. It's okay. It's just us. No one is here to hurt us."

Boy sobbed and curled forward over his knees. Rocking, the teen pleaded with him. "Hurts… Always hurts… I'm sorry… Bad, so sorry…"

"Hey," Draco called and took an awkward step forward. "No more hurt. Not for right now."

The child behind his friend's eyes looked up at that. He didn't seem to understand, so Draco repeated himself, taking another step forward. Boy trembled at his approach, but he allowed the Slytherin within touching distance. However, when Draco reached out to touch his shoulder, the child jerked away with a frightened whimper.

"I'm sorry," Draco said quickly, hoping to stave off another round of hysterics. "It's okay. I won't touch you. I'm sorry."
Boy stared at him, truly silent for the first time. Face soaked with tears and sweat, he looked utterly wretched, but something had happened. He stared at Draco as if he were seeing a sunrise for the first time. And psychologically, he was. For the first time in his whole existence, Boy felt a faint, barely perceptible touch of hope.

He hadn't really thought the person with him was a Boy like he was Boy. No one was as bad or needed as much punishment as Boy did. The person on the Inside - who was gone now; the person with the bed - had felt pain, was a kind of Boy, making him kind of safe, but Boy always knew that the almost-Boy could hurt him if Boy was bad enough.

Then he had seen this blond person be hurt on the Outside. With a whip, that dreadful punishment, so he was more like Boy than the person on the Inside had been, but still not as bad as Boy, nothing was as bad as Boy. But suddenly - hearing this person apologize so desperately - he thought maybe, just maybe this really was a Boy like Boy. Maybe he was safe. Maybe he didn't have to be alone.

Sighing, the child shuddered and edged closer so that only a few inches separated them. His clear blue and green eyes were pinned to the blond's face as if searching for something. Draco hardly dared to breathe. This was the most incredible experience of his life. To have such a hurt and frightened child show even the littlest bit of trust was indescribable. Each little gesture meant the world and Draco was terrified he'd mess this up and ruin the child before him completely.

His fear must have shown in his eyes because Boy suddenly offered a tearful smile and huddled next to Draco, so close they were almost touching. "Boy really is Boy," the curly-haired teen explained thickly before pressing his face tiredly against his knees, crying softly.

Unlike the previous tears of fear or pain Draco had witnessed in his father's Pensieve, these tears were tears of relief. Draco smiled, his own eyes wet, and just let the teen cry against him, but no matter how much he wanted to just sit there and let the broken child take comfort from him, he couldn't wait much longer.

Draco had been worried when Shadow was assigned detention. He'd decided to wait outside Umbridge's office for his friend. He wanted to be there if Shadow became as upset as last time. He hadn't expected to see the woman come running out like Dementors were on her heels. He had Stupefied her before he really knew what he was doing. She would be waking up soon. He needed Severus. His eyes caught on the bracelet Shadow always wore and he knew what he had to do.

"Boy, can I see your wrist?" he asked softly. "May I see that pretty bracelet?" He thought he'd feel ridiculous talking to Shadow that way, but he didn't. Not at all. Boy was so obviously fragile that it was really easy to do whatever would make the child feel better.

Boy glanced at his wrist. He stared at it for a moment, tears of utter sorrow still running down his cheeks. Sniffing, he lifted his arm and pushed it in the other Boy's direction. He flinched and whimpered softly as the pale fingers gently took his arm and undid the bracelet that summoned Severus.

As soon as the bracelet was off, Boy yanked away and huddled, panting and trying to calm down. It hadn't hurt, but being touched invoked phantom pains all over his body. Draco watched this sadly and spoke a litany of calming words. He had just gotten Boy to calm down again when Severus barged into the room.

Boy flung himself toward the corner and screamed hysterically. Draco leapt to his feet and grabbed Severus's ferocious eyes with his own, shoving his memories of the past fifteen minutes into the man's head.
Severus flung words back at him. **I will attend to Umbridge. Wait. Calm him. I'll return.** He spun around and practically flew from the room.

Severus almost couldn't control his deadly fury at the vile woman, but protecting his son came first. He could not use the Dark Arts that deserved to be released on the woman's depraved mind and body. The anklet still active on his person prevented it. His revenge would have to wait.

So he merely Obliviated her and crafted the most intricate and complex memories he was capable of to make her think nothing odd had happened in the detention. A boggart had appeared, took the form of a Ministry executioner, and frightened Shadow until Umbridge banished it and let the shaken teen go, smug in the knowledge she had power over Shadow and, through him, his awful father. Hopefully the artificial satisfaction he had implemented would lead her to leave Shadow alone for awhile.

Severus levitated the woman's unconscious body back up to her office, planning on arranging her there as if she had fallen asleep at her desk after the detention. He propped her upright outside the door before cracking it open. It was pitch black. Casting a temporary night-sight spell, Severus glanced around the room. He was utterly shocked at what he saw.

Boy was huddled next to Draco, the Slytherin murmuring gently in his ear, and looked as peaceful as Severus had ever seen him. He still looked faintly distressed and grief-stricken, but he was no longer crying. He watched as Boy's eyes finally shut and the traumatized child slipped into sleep. Raising his wand, Severus cast a sleeping charm to ensure the teen wouldn't wake for a good couple hours and re-lit the room.

Draco looked up at him, his grey eyes grief-stricken and aged. Severus nodded, silently telling his student how proud he was of him. Draco watched as Severus positioned the bitch just so, made a few final touches, and bent to carry his son in his arms. Shadow was only one hundred and fifteen pounds, so it was easy for Severus to do.

Draco followed his teacher and friend back to Severus's quarters. He stayed in the living room, arms wrapped around himself as he stood in front of the fire, while Severus got Shadow settled into bed. Draco didn't turn when he heard the bedroom door click shut and his teacher approach him from behind. He kept his eyes firmly on the fire and concentrated on it, afraid that Severus would try to get into his mind.

"I am considering it," Severus's smooth voice answered him, proving him right. "Shadow will not be pleased when he realizes what you saw. He would want me to strike it from your memory."

Draco shivered, rage clawing at his stomach. He was far from stupid. He knew they were talking about Lockhart's presence in Umbitch's office. He knew what it meant, and he was so incredibly angry that he had to literally hold himself together to keep from exploding. Magic rolled and pulsed under his skin. Dark magic, destructive magic, and he had an inkling of what Demon's magic would feel like, except that the alter existed on a more massive scale.

"Don't you dare," he warned darkly with a tone of voice he had never heard from himself before. He almost sounded like his father.

Severus hissed as he spun the teen around to face him. "I will do what is best for my son whether you like it or not!"

Draco bared his teeth like a wild animal, his grey eyes blazing silver. His magic lashed out and it was only because Severus was prepared that he wasn't flung across the room. As it was, he had to take two staggering steps backward under the blow.
"You will not touch my mind," the blond said with icy fury. "I invoke the Rite of Vengeance and call upon the ancient Goddess Nemesis! Supera Dea dicto! A perverse crime of hubris has been committed and I willingly stand guard to ensure that justice is paid! Mihi ut voto meus et ultione constringere!"

Magic crackled around him for a brief moment before fading into his skin. The rite had been activated successfully. It bound Draco to see that justice was done within a year of entering the vow if Shadow was unsuccessful or unable to do so himself. Should the blond fail in his charge, he would be penalized by having the suffering of the victim magically inflicted upon him.

Severus stood rigid, appalled. "Do you realize what you've just done, you stupid boy?"

Draco met his gaze defiantly. "I will not let you make me forget. I've seen too many horrible things done to Shadow and have done nothing to stop it! I won't stand helplessly by this time!"

Severus regarded the teen silently. The clever little Slytherin was right, he thought furiously. He couldn't erase Draco's memory without risking the chance that Draco could be condemned to experience firsthand what it was like for Shadow to suffer at Lockhart's hands. That was something Severus could not inflict on anyone.

Coldly furious at being denied, knowing that Shadow would be made desperately upset by what Draco knew and had done, he grabbed the teen by his collar and flung him toward his door. "Get out," he hissed threateningly. "Get out now, you selfish brat! You have no idea what you've just done to Shadow, how you've just destroyed the fragile healing he was gaining by making him bear another burden you so thoughtlessly added to his shoulders!"

Trembling in fear at his teacher's very real anger, the blond allowed himself to be thrown from the room. Severus slammed the door shut in his face with a final hateful snarl. Shaken and confused, Draco sank to the cold stone floor of the corridor. It took several minutes before he could pull himself to his feet. He ran as fast as he could, pushing his body as hard as it could go. He sprinted, gasping for breath, through the Slytherin common room and up to his dorm. Draco slammed the door shut and applied every locking spell he knew before allowing the breakdown to come.

Screaming, raging, he threw everything within reach at the walls. He flung himself at his bed, tore his sheets, and pounded on the mattress with angry cries until he couldn't any longer. Draco finally collapsed, his exhausted sobs muffled by his pillow.

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Neville entered the common room an hour or so before dawn. His tread was as heavy as his heart and his eyes were dull. He couldn't believe the things he had said to Ginny. All night he wandered the courtyard and tried to find peace, but it wouldn't come. He was so lost in himself that he didn't see the figure on the couch near the dying fire.

Ginny almost lost her nerve when she saw the state Neville was in, but then she reminded herself that he looked so beaten because of her and she had to do something to right things. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped forward and softly called her boyfriend's name. Neville froze and stared at her like a deer caught in spell-light.

"Nev, I just wanted to say I'm so sorry that you had to go through so much," she began. "I'm sorry I pushed you to tell me before you were ready. It was selfish and immature, but I'm glad I know. I'm glad to know because I want to help you. Because we're together now, and by definition together means to share, right? And I want to share this with you, but I understand if you don't want to be my boyfriend anymore. I can be really pushy and quick-tempered. I'm really sorry for that, Nev. I love
you and I didn't mean to hurt you."

Neville couldn't believe it! She was supposed to find him disgusting and weak, tainted permanently. How could she stand there expecting to be rejected by him when she was perfect and everything he wanted? It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Ginny nodded, accepting that he was still mad. Her long hair spilled over her shoulders as she wrapped her arms around her thin waist. "Okay. Well, I just wanted to say that." She turned, tears in her eyes.

Neville spun her around and hugged her hard. Crying out in surprise, she embraced him back. Grinning, she clung to him tightly, deeply grateful to be forgiven. She pulled away and laughed. Neville smiled back at her, exhausted and feeling he had just been given a reprieve from execution.

"Want to curl up here with me?" she asked, gesturing backward at the couch she had been using.

"Yeah…" Neville answered hoarsely. "Yeah. That sounds really good." He took her hand gently in his. "I love you, too, Ginny."

She smiled and they settled on the couch, cuddled up to each other, the fire warm on their faces.

**Chapter end.**
Shadow woke with a start. What…? Wide-eyed, he looked around his father's bedchamber and tried desperately to remember how he got there.

"That woman almost ruined everything!"

Shadow gasped, spinning around with his hand clutched over his racing heart. "Don't do that!" he hissed furiously at the phantom who had appeared silently behind him.

"I almost finished making the adjustments to Boy's mind and she had to summon him! Helga and Rowena were already unhappy with her, but now she has me to contend with." The phantom was glowering darkly, his arms crossed and his thick black eyebrows almost covering his eyes they were so low.

"Wait…" Shadow held up a hand. "Summon him?" The last thing he could recall was sitting at the desk waiting to be told what his detention was. Then… nothing.

"Boggarts feed on fear so when she released one it pulled Boy front and center," Salazar growled, but his grimace slowly relaxed into an evil smirk. "She got more than she bargained for at least. She about fainted when the Dark Lord, Vernon Dursley, and Lockhart appeared in her office! You should have seen her face when she saw the way the pervert was fondling himself! She ran out of there so fast, I felt a breeze!"

Shadow felt the blood drain from his head and had to sit down or risk fainting. "What?" he croaked.

"I thought for sure everything was ruined," Salazar continued. "And then an absolute miracle happened!"

"A miracle?"

Salazar grinned. "Draco Malfoy Stupefied the loathsome witch and exterminated the boggart."

"Draco!" Shadow exclaimed horrified.

"But that's not the best part!" Salazar face was practically glowing with excitement. "Boy recognized him from a memory he was shown when Malfoy was whipped. Boy identified him as harmless and even someone he could potentially trust. That is an immense step for the alter. Strangely, this is the best thing that could have happened to set his damaged psyche on the path of healing." His enthusiasm damped with an annoyed scowl. "But that doesn't mean I forgive Umbridge. We may not be able to do anything overt because the Headmistress has accepted her, but we can be quite clever."

"Draco… He saw… The boggart… and Boy…" Shadow repeated dazedly. This couldn't be happening.

"Yeah." Salazar shrugged. "He was right pissed, too. Invoked the Rite of Vengeance. The Goddess Nemesis has accepted his vow and bound him to see that justice is done."

Shadow felt all the blood rush back into his face as he burned with mortification. He jumped to his feet and ran from the room. Severus called out to him, but he ignored it. He was too furious to stop and talk. Shadow had read about the Vengeance Rite that called on the Goddess Nemesis. He knew
what the punishment was if Draco failed!

Within minutes, he was panting at the blond's door. It was locked. Furious, Shadow flung his magic forward and the door blew almost off its hinges. Nothing was going to stop him. He was so focused on the target of his ire, Shadow barely noticed the state of the room as he marched forward.

Draco woke with a startled gasp, his hair sticking up and his red-rimmed eyes still fogged with sleep. He stared in shock as Shadow stormed over, his fists clenched and shaking at his sides.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Shadow bellowed, wild-eyed. "What gave you the right to do something like that, huh?"

Stung, Draco leapt from the bed. "Funny! Here I was thinking we were bloody friends and that something like this would involve me! What the hell happened to handling our problems together?"

"It was none of your fucking business!" Shadow was furious that Draco was turning this around on him.

"Well, I think it is my fucking business!" Draco yelled back, silver eyes flashing.

"You have no idea what you're talking about, you prat!" Shadow shouted. "The bastard's already been dealt with! It was over with!"

Draco growled and stepped forward aggressively. "Like hell! If he's still alive, then it's not over. If you won't take care of it, I will."

"I can take care of myself, Malfy!" Shadow hissed, leaning forward so they were nose to nose.

"Oh, really? Because from where I'm standing, it seems like you're doing a pretty poor job of it!"

That was enough to push Shadow over the edge. He punched him right in the jaw. Draco staggered backward before launching himself forward with a hoarse yell. Striking at whatever they could reach, they grunted with pain and effort as they rolled across the floor over paper, clothes, and other debris strewn around the room. Shadow got in another hit to the blond's face, splitting his lip and drawing blood.

"You're so fucking annoying!" Shadow grunted furiously, tears burning his eyes. Why did Draco have to pry into everything? Why couldn't he just leave things well enough alone?

"Stand together against the world, my ass! You won't even tell me who our enemies are!" Draco bellowed, elbowing Shadow in the side, hard enough to wind him.

Trying to break away, Shadow was half-sitting when Draco tackled him, making the brunet clip his head on the side of a drawer. Shadow staggered backward before launching himself forward with a hoarse yell. Striking at whatever they could reach, they grunted with pain and effort as they rolled across the floor over paper, clothes, and other debris strewn around the room. Shadow collapsed backward with a whoosh of lost air and Draco pounced, trying to pin the gasping teen.

Shadow thrashed and kneed Draco in the stomach. "Get over… yourself! Just because we're… friends doesn't mean… I have to tell you… everything!"

"Tell me everything? That's bloody hilarious! You don't tell me anything!" Draco spat. He took another punch to the face, this time to his eye and he roared, flipping Shadow off him. "Boy trusts me more than you do!" He lashed out and landed a solid hit to Shadow's mouth, breaking his lip open, a match to his own.
Shadow fell back, eyes wide. "What?"

"You heard me! He trusted me enough to talk to me - to tell me that he was hurting. That's more than you ever did!"

Panting, Shadow stared at his friend in shock. Draco glared back, his silver eyes molten with anger. A movement at the doorway made them both look over. Blaise, Theo, Vince, and Greg were staring into the room like they had never seen anything so fascinating before. Shadow gasped, horrified.

Draco sneered, disgusted, and slammed and locked the door with several violent flicks of his wand. "There's a silencing ward on my room. They didn't hear anything. They could only see us."

Sitting up, thanking god for silencing wards, Shadow propped his back against the wall. Draco sat across from him, leaning against the bed. Both of them tentatively felt at their swelling faces. Shadow wished the blond's eye wasn't turning such a spectacular shade of red. It was making him feel surprisingly guilty.

"Look," he said roughly, throwing a lone shoe away from him in frustration and simmering humiliation. "I didn't tell you because... Shit, I just don't want to talk about it. Ever. But I guess I'm glad you came when you did."

"Don't lie to me," Draco sneered. "You hate that I had to rescue you."

"I hate it when anyone rescues me, not just you." Shadow smiled faintly, noticing the pouty expression behind the blond's bad attitude. "I need to be able to defend myself, but I shouldn't take that out on you."

"No, you shouldn't," Draco said harshly; he was still angry that Shadow had kept something of this magnitude from him, but he shouldn't have brought up Boy. That was low of him. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to straighten it. "Shadow, I couldn't let Professor Snape erase my memories, and I have a right to vengeance! We're friends for fuck's sake, aren't we? This is something you don't get keep from me."

Shadow sat there, numb. Draco wasn't reacting with disgust or pity like he had feared the blond would after finding out about Lockhart and seeing Boy first hand. Maybe - just maybe - he could forgive himself. After all, Draco seemed to be able to forgive Shadow's weakness. A powerful relief washed through his soul at the mere possibility that he might be able to let go of his self-loathing even just a little bit.

He gasped with the overwhelming emotion and ducked his head to hide his expression. Draco peered across at him curiously and Shadow wished they weren't sitting face to face. It made it more difficult to hide. To distract them both, he quickly asked, "You have a year, right? Before you get cursed?"

"Yeah." Draco stared at his friend, knowing something else was going on behind the downcast blue and green eyes.

But Shadow had already moved on, thinking now of the rite's consequence. He shivered with dread. Draco couldn't be allowed to be cursed with memories of Lockhart molesting him, couldn't be allowed to know what it was like to be temporarily insane and think you like it. Scowling unhappily, he stared down at his fists. The knuckles were beginning to bruise.

"I guess we'll deal with it when school lets out for the summer." Shadow hated the idea of waiting. He wanted to make sure the rite was ended as soon as possible to make sure Draco was safe, but he
didn't see how he could while they were here at school.

Draco didn't notice his friend's distress. He was distracted picturing his revenge on the sick teacher who dared to hurt Shadow. He couldn't stop the sadistic smile that came at the thought. "That'll be fun."

Shadow lifted his head to sneer at him. "Maybe for you."

Draco shot him a bloodthirsty grin. "You know you want to kick his ass."

Shadow considered that. He pictured Lockhart broken and bleeding, crushed and shattered, and smiled. He looked at his friend slyly out of the corner of his eye. "Maybe."

The sudden levity couldn't hold as the grim situation reasserted itself. Draco dropped his head back and frowned darkly up at the ceiling. "What we really need to think about right now is Umbitch," he muttered, his voice filled with a cold fury.

"She's definitely gone too far," the brunet agreed. "But we still can't do much against her." He sighed and looked again at Draco's battered features. Standing, he crossed the distance between them and knelt next to his Slytherin friend. Gently, Shadow touched the bruised skin and muttered a healing charm.

Draco let him work, his eyes unfocused as he plotted.

Shadow watched him, feeling a warm, endearing fondness spread throughout his chest. "You didn't have to do that, you know. Severus already tortured him somehow, made him unable to function. He's not a threat."

Draco met his eyes with a focused resolve Shadow had never seen there before. "It's not enough. He needs to die for what he did, maybe even more than Dumbledore did."

Shadow's face was throbbing and he ached in half a dozen places from blows Draco had landed, but somehow that made the teen in front of him more solid, more real. It strangely made him feel comforted. "I won't lie," Shadow whispered, unable to look away. "I want him dead, Serpentine, but I want to forget him even more. I don't want to see him again; I don't want to ever have to talk about it. He really fucked me up bad and I just want it over."

"So forget it," Draco answered seriously. "I'll take care of it. Don't worry about me. This is simple stuff."

Shadow shook his head, rejecting the idea instantly.

Draco grabbed Shadow's shoulder hard and pulled so that they were mere inches apart. "You listen to me, Shadow. You don't have to do everything yourself. Leave Lockhart to me. I'll take care of him. Permanently. Let it go like you know you want to. If I'm really your friend, you'll trust me with this and drop it."

Shadow stared at him for a long moment. Trust him? Could he really? Shadow felt something in him give. Lockhart wasn't his problem anymore. He still had the aftermath to deal with, but… trusting Draco to be able to uphold the vow on his own helped ease some of the burden from Shadow's mind and soul. He was slowly realizing that sometimes doing battle yourself would cost too much, that sometimes you need other people to fight for you.

"All right," he agreed in a whisper, eyes wide and pinned on the blond, painfully handing over the trust requested of him.
Draco could almost feel the weight of it settle on his shoulders, but it was comforting instead of heavy. "Thank you," he said and smiled crookedly with his still bleeding mouth. He let Shadow's shoulder go and they backed off a bit, allowing some personal space between them. Still grinning, Draco drawled, "Now, about Umbitch..."

Shadow couldn't answer. He was still blown away by the concept that the Lockhart issue was closed. Draco would handle it; Shadow didn't have to think about it anymore. For all intents and purposes, Lockhart was already dead. Shadow felt such relief that tears burned his eyes. He quickly put his head down to hide them.

Draco either didn't notice or he was continuing to be unbelievably sensitive and didn't mention them. "I think we need to stop attacking her directly," he admitted, hissing as he fingered his swelling eye. "It's only pushing her to lengths we aren't prepared to counter yet. We will definitely make her pay eventually, but for now - and I hate to say it - but we need to concentrate on protecting ourselves more than getting revenge."

"Defense instead of offense?" Shadow asked, cocking his head, already knowing where the blond was going.

Draco nodded, seeing the recognition in his friend's expression. "Yes, the defense group. I think we're ready. We have enough Slytherins that will join, so Slytherin House won't be outnumbered or underrepresented, but I was thinking that just having a secret defense club will undermine the bitch and we can add to that by slipping in anti-Ministry messages and information. When we're ready, we'll have a trained mob that will help us bring her down."

"You know, I knew there was a reason we're friends. I like the way you think," Shadow said with a smile. "Let's have a first meeting this Saturday at the Hog's Head. It's our first Hogsmeade weekend and that'll get everyone away from Hogwarts and out from under the bitch's eye."

"Agreed. I'll start spreading the word."

"I'll tell Neville and the twins to do the same, and I can talk to the few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws I see in my classes. I know Luna will definitely come."

"It's a plan," Draco said and then groaned. He turned and laid flat on the floor, hands covering his aching face. "Now go get Severus. I think I'm dying."

"You're such a baby." Shadow shook his head with a laugh. He had already healed the bruises and split lip a little, which was more than Shadow got, but he went to do as he was told anyway. He'd do anything to keep the blond from whining and complaining all day. Now he just needed to figure out how was he going to explain this to Severus.

He didn't have to go far. It turned out that his father was already waiting for the door to open. Shadow had no doubt that Severus could have torn down the wards and entered had he wanted to, and Shadow smiled gratefully to let him know the fact that his father had waited was appreciated.

Severus was unimpressed. He was scowling fiercely as soon as he took in his son's bloody lip and bruised face. "I trust you will not resort to physical altercations to solve all the problems you have with your friends," he said waspishly.

"Whatever, Dad." Shadow sighed. It was barely seven-thirty in the morning and already he was exhausted. "Can you patch us up or should we go to Pomfrey?"

Severus studied his son's eyes for a moment before sneering and handing him the potions and salves
they would need. Shadow tossed half to the blond and went up to his room without a word of explanation. He didn't think he could tell his father what had happened between Draco and him even if he had wanted to. He wasn't even sure himself.

xXx

Several hours later, Shadow walked into his second class of the day. He felt twitchy. He didn't remember firsthand what Umbitch had done to him, but he was still extremely tense. Of course, that was a good thing because it reinforced her false memories; this was exactly how she expected him to behave. Even though he anticipated the worst from her, he was still shocked when they were assigned lines with a very illegal Blood Quill.

Hissing at the pain, Shadow's first thought was of Neville. His brother had DADA yesterday, and if he had to use the quill, Shadow didn't want to think what that had done to him. He had been doing so well with his addiction, this could throw him over the edge. Then he thought about Hermione. His once-friend had been assigned many nights of detention with Umbridge since school started. The Blood-Quill went a long way to explain Hermione's drawn features and withdrawn behavior.

The twins saw that there was something cold in the depths of their friend's two-colored eyes that truly frightened them. With a quick glance at each other, seeing the agreement there, the twins did the unthinkable. They raised their already welt-covered hands and confessed.

Umbridge stared at them like they were raw meat and she were a starving dog. She ordered them to unlock the books and gave them detention that night and for every following night until the end of October. Shadow stared at the two boys in shock, almost afraid for them, but Fred winked and George grinned almost like they were going to enjoy it.

xXx

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked when he found Shadow waiting patiently at the portrait hole before lunch.

"I need to talk to Neville. Is he here?"

"I think so." Ron eyed the teen for a moment before saying the password, "Lion heart."

Shadow barely kept from rolling his eyes as he followed the redhead into the Gryffindor common room. The sight made his steps falter as memories blindsided him. For a long time, Gryffindor House was the closest thing he had to a home. He looked around at the plush and worn couches, the warm red and yellow colors, and smiled.

"Shadow?" Neville came down the dorm stairs and hurried over. "Is everything okay?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Shadow drawled and took the hand he knew bore invisible words etched into the skin.

Neville blushed brightly.

Ron was standing a few feet away, watching them suspiciously, and when he saw Shadow take Neville's hand and the shy Gryffindor blush, his eyebrows shot up almost into his hairline.

"I kind of lost it," Neville admitted, pulling his hand away. "But Ginny helped me out. We're..." His blush worsened. "... back together now. I talked to her and told her a bit."

Shadow could only stare. "You did?"
"She was upset, but she was glad I told her. She wants to be there for me, I guess." Neville smiled, his joy practically making him glow.

"I'm so glad for you." Shadow grinned and hugged him. He could share in his brother's happiness this time, he realized, thinking of Draco finding out and the Slytherin's surprisingly supportive reaction.

"Hey!" Ginny called as she came downstairs. "You're not trying to steal my man, are you?"

"Nah, I know a lost cause when I see one." Shadow laughed and released Neville. "Oh, I almost forgot. I wanted to tell you guys that Umbridge is going back to her old way of teaching. Books open around her again. The twins admitted to being the pranksters and removed the curse or whatever it was."

Ron's jaw dropped. "What!"

"They have detention until the end of October," Shadow gravely told them.

"Bloody hell," Ron said faintly, looking very distressed.

Shadow didn't have anything to say that would make him feel better. He stood with them for a minute longer, but it was awkward. It was obvious they were all thinking about the twins. Shadow excused himself to let them talk and went down to lunch. He hoped Fred and George knew what they were doing and that the Gryffindors would be able to help them.

xXx

Hermione knocked softly on her boyfriend's office door. She knew she shouldn't. He was her teacher now, for goodness sake! But she had to see him. Viktor opened the door with his usual public scowl. The expression stayed until Hermione stepped inside and they were safe behind his very strong wards.

"Hermione," he said gently as he stepped forward, cupping her cheeks.

Hermione put her hands over his with a teary smile. "I needed to see you." She hadn't been this shaken up in a long time. Not even when she had come out of her first detention with Umbridge had she felt so terrible.

"Is it her?" Viktor asked urgently, anger sparking in his dark eyes, also remembering the last time Hermione had come to him with such an expression.

"No. No, it's not her." She shook off his hands and stepped forward, burrowing herself into his chest.

Viktor held her for a while, not pushing. He knew she'd tell him what she could when she was calmer. He hated how she trembled against him and felt furious with his own inability to protect her. He came here to be with her, even if at a distance. It was better than not seeing her for years to come, but being here and still unable to help was worse. He truly adored the brilliantly intelligent and passionate witch in his arms. He hated how worn down and beaten she had increasingly become as the school year wore on.

"It's Harry," she finally mumbled.

"Harry?" Viktor frowned down at her. "But you were owled that letter a time ago, yes? He said he was well."
"I know, I know!" Hermione cried and flung herself out of his arms to pace in agitation. Her hands clawed at her frizzy hair in distress, making it stand almost on end. She spoke rapidly and Viktor listened with an intense scowl, trying to understand her.

"The handwriting matches other letters we've received from him and it sounded like Harry mostly. I mean the few bits that didn't, well, he has a right to sound different with everything he's been through. But I was rereading the letter, you know, just to hear his voice in my head. It's stupid, but I feel closer to him when I read it. Anyway, I'm trying to say I think the letter's not what it appears to be. I think Harry's trying to tell us something he couldn't say outright. I'm not sure what it means, good or bad, but if it's good why couldn't he just write it? Why be so subtle that even I missed it at first? What if he wrote it under duress, Viktor? And we didn't pay it heed until now!"

"Slow down, please, Hermione," Viktor soothed her. He led her over to his desk and sat in his chair, pulling her sideways into his lap.

She was too distraught to resist and she lowered her head to his shoulder, taking deep breaths.

"Now. Say again, but slowly, yes?"

Hermione nodded firmly, sitting straighter to stare into his dark eyes. "Harry wrote that he Apparated all the way to China. I can believe that. Weirder things have happened around Harry. And he did describe a whole lot of latent magic just floating around at the time due to the duel with…" She swallowed hard. It was difficult to imagine what that horrific battle must have been like. It always made her stomach clinch with dread for her friend. "…Voldemort. Well, he said he got to China. Vishnu's temple to be exact, where Buddhist monks were healing and training him in secret."

"Yes. This you made clear already. I thought it a good thing," Viktor said in confusion.

"I thought it was, too. I was so excited to hear from him, to know he was okay… I completely didn't realize what was missing!" Hermione cried, working herself up again.

"Missing what?"

"Don't you see? Buddhist monks wouldn't be in Vishnu's temple. Vishnu is a Hindu god!"

Viktor frowned deeply. "You are certain? There can be no sharing?"

"Well, a lot of people mistake the two religions for each other, they both originate in Asia, but Buddhists follow the teachings of the Buddha, while Hinduism has a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses, one of which is Vishnu. Some Hindus believe Buddha was an Avatar of Vishnu, but Buddhists would not believe that. They do not believe in the Hindu pantheon."

"I see," Viktor said thoughtfully and wrapped his arms gently around her waist. "Could Harry be mistaken? You said it is common and perhaps their English is not so good. He is in China, yes?"

"Well, maybe," Hermione allowed, the tension draining from her tight shoulders. "I did consider that. Harry might have made a mistake. I'm sure he's not really talking about the finer distinctions of their religion, he has other things to worry about, but it's a strange mistake to make, don't you think?"

"Have you told your Order?"

"It's not my Order." Hermione smiled at him. "But, no. I haven't told them my suspicions. The Headmistress told Ron and me that they couldn't get into China to find Harry or even get them to admit if Harry is there or not. I didn't want to worry her further unnecessarily. Maybe I'm overreacting." She looked at him solemnly. "That's why I needed to talk to you. You can think
clearly about it. I'm terrified that Harry's not okay and maybe I'm jumping at shadows. I've spent all
summer worrying about him. It's hard to stop."

"I understand. He was also a good friend to me in the tournament," Viktor told her softly. He
tenderly pushed her hair behind her ears and smoothed it flat. "I worry about you right now more.
You are tired. I talked to Professor Snape. He agreed to look after you, but it does not seem to be
helping as much as I hoped." He sighed, caressing her cheek. "I wish you were able to tell me what
that woman has done."

"I'm okay," she promised, her cheeks warming with embarrassment and pleasure. "Professor Snape
has helped me a lot. Thank you, Viktor."

"Not okay enough," Viktor argued, but he left the topic alone. There was nothing to be done. She
could not tell him and he would not make things worse for her by making her feel bad about it.
"About Harry, I think it is a mistake. If he were being watched or forced to write such a letter, it
would not have contained such information. The only people who would force him would not want
such things to be leaving them, yes? However, I possibly am wrong in this. It would make you feel
to tell the Headmistress this flaw. Do so, but perhaps just in calm conversation. That way it
doesn't distress her, only make her curious."

"You're right. As usual." Hermione smiled and laid her head on his shoulder once more. "I hate
not knowing what's going on."

Viktor chuckled, holding her tighter. "You must know everything, yes?"

"Yes!" she said hotly but then laughed with him.

They spent an hour together, just talking about books and other interesting things. Viktor asked if she
thought he was a good teacher. His review came back from Umbridge and it had not been positive.
Hermione reassured him that everyone enjoyed his classes and were learning the lessons as well as
they had with McGonagall. In the end, they both felt much better for the visit and wished it could
happen more often.

Like a gentleman, Viktor walked Hermione to his door and kissed her cheek and the back of her
hand before allowing her to leave. Blushing madly, Hermione hurried away, intending to stop by the
Headmistress's office before returning to the Tower. She had a good half-hour before curfew, but she
didn't want to be late. She was a Prefect and had a good example to set.

"Hermione!"

She turned at the voice and found Shadow coming from the direction of the library.

"I'm glad I ran into you," the curly-haired boy continued with a charming smile. In actuality, he had
been waiting with the Map for a good fifteen minutes. He laughed internally, thinking what the
Hermione of a year ago would have told this Hermione who snuck off to be with her professor
boyfriend against school rules. "Can we talk for a moment?"

"Sure," she answered, worried despite his causal demeanor. "I heard from Ron about your DADA
class today. I'm sorry," she said in reference to the Blood Quill. Despite knowing she couldn't talk
about it, she still felt guilty for not warning everyone.

He pulled her into a darkened alcove in the middle of the hallway by her elbow. They were only a
few corridors away from the main staircase, but so close to curfew the hallway was deserted and
silent. Shadow put up privacy wards anyway. His expression turned serious, his strange eyes
darkening with concern.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I was worried. You've had a lot of detentions with her, right? Is it always like that?" The knowledge that Umbridge had been hurting Hermione all this time made Shadow more determined than ever to make sure the bitch was taken care of as soon as possible.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed, mouth a thin line, but then she offered a small smile. "Until Professor Snape began giving me detentions as well, she would give me one almost every night." She hoped Shadow understood that she was thanking him for his father's intervention.

"That's good to hear, although I'm sure you would never have thought it would be," he said wryly.

She laughed. "No. I never would have thought earning a detention before now was a good thing. Especially with Professor Snape. But I'm actually learning a lot in them."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that." Shadow smiled, glad that she was getting help. "Why was she targeting you anyway?"

Hermione clutched the strap of her school bag tightly in her hand. Thinking about Umbridge always made her mad and she had to fight to keep her temper. "I'm too vocal with my disapproval of her teaching methods and subject matter," she finally answered when she felt she had better control of her voice. It still came out flat and tight.

Shadow's eyes widened, pretending to be surprised at her vehemence. He bit his lip and looked to the side as if debating about something.

Hermione's attention sharpened and she narrowed her eyes at him. "What is it?"

He regarded her thoughtfully. They stood at almost the same height. He was only slightly taller than her, so it was easy for him to study her eyes. "Me and a few others that I know are planning on getting together and practicing defense on our own. There are concerns that we won't be skilled enough should something happen, and there are the OWLs and NEWTs to prepare for."

"Umbridge wouldn't approve," Hermione murmured, then slowly began to smile. "Any room for a few more members?"

"As you mentioned, this group might get into trouble with Umbridge. It's important that we don't get found out." Shadow ran a hand through his curls as if nervous. He couldn't appear too eager to have her or she'd figure out that it was part of his plan all along. "I'm not exactly her favorite person, either, and I'm afraid of what will happen to my father if she finds out. I kinda want the group small."

"But it's a good idea," Hermione protested predictably. "We need to learn how to defend ourselves. There's a war going on and..." She took a deep breath. "I want to be able to stand at my friend's side if he has to go against Voldemort. Harry's going to come back. I really need to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Shadow stared at her, shocked. He hadn't foreseen this as her reason. He felt suddenly uncomfortable. "That's why you're speaking up so much in class? You want to learn for Potter?"

"For myself," Hermione said sharply, glaring, but she let it go with a sigh. "And for Harry, but also for everyone else, too. It's going to get bad. I want to help."

Shadow understood that and was impressed. "All right. We're meeting at the Hog's Head. You can invite others you think would really want to do this and who will keep quiet about it. It's just a
meeting to iron out the details."

Hermione nodded in agreement, her face set. "We could have everyone that still wants to do it after the meeting commit to a secrecy spell or something."

"Good idea," Shadow approved, very pleased she had come up with this so fast. He had expected to have to hint more. None of the other Houses would let a Slytherin bind them, but they would trust Hermione. "Do you think you will have something by Saturday?"

"I'll get right on it," Hermione promised. "What time?"

"How about noon?"

"That's fine." Hermione turned to go but stopped. She looked back at him and smiled. "Thanks, Shadow."

"You're welcome," he whispered to her back as she hurried away. For the first time since he had arrived at Grimmauld Place, he entertained the idea of telling her the truth.

xXx

Umbridge climbed the Headmistress's spiral staircase triumphantly. The older woman looked up at her with a smile, but Umbridge knew better. She knew that she had an enemy in Minerva McGonagall, but McGonagall wasn't as in control as she'd like to think and it was time for Umbridge to make that completely clear.

"Dolores, can I help you with something?"

The Headmistress sat at her desk, papers covering the surface. It was astonishing how much paperwork the administration of a school accumulated. Her head was pounding with a tension headache and eyestrain. She didn't think the High Inquisitor's presence was going to make that any better.

"I wanted to inform you personally that the delinquents responsible for the recent pranks have been apprehended," she said sweetly. "I must say, Minerva, the delay and inefficiency of enforcing the rules is not encouraging. The Ministry is growing quite concerned about your aptitude for the Headmistress position."

"They need not be," Minerva answered coolly. "I believe you are overreacting to a simple prank. Teachers and students are pranked everyday."

"A simple prank that would have left me severely injured, has cost me a sizable amount in healer bills, and rendered me unable to fulfill my duties for over a week," Umbridge returned, her smile widening. "I can't help but notice your lack of curiosity as to the identity of the pranksters. It leads me to believe you were aware of the culprits all along."

McGonagall grit her teeth. "Certainly not. I am not curious simply because I was informed at dinner by Professor Lupin that two students of his House had confessed."

"I hope that is the case because some aren't so certain a woman with possible antagonistic attitudes toward the Ministry should hold such a position over impressionable youths, as I'm sure you are aware." Umbridge tittered as if they shared a joke, although McGonagall looked in no way amused. "But you are a wise woman. I'm confident you understand that this is a chance you are being given to prove your loyalty, and how quickly that chance can be revoked before the Ministry has cause regrets it."
"I understand completely, Dolores," McGonagall answered evenly.

The Undersecretary laughed again and left the woman to her paperwork.

McGonagall stared down at it blindly, her headache twice as bad. She reached for a potion in her top drawer and took it silently. Yes. The message was clear. She had to toe the line or risk being removed as Headmistress. She could possibly even be imprisoned depending on her infraction due to her association with the Order. The walls closed in a little tighter.

xXx

Later that night, someone else in the castle was being closed in upon, but unlike Minerva who was being hunted by outside forces, Shadow was being hunted by himself…

He stood in the shower, warm water beating down on his thin shoulders. It had been a long time since a shower had felt this good, not since Quidditch almost two years ago. He tilted his head back, his eyes closed, feeling the gentle heat soak into him. He tilted his head to the side, stretching his neck, water sliding down his back.

He smiled as hands snaked around his waist and smooth lips descended on his exposed throat with a gentle kiss. Laughing softly, he leaned his weight backward against a smooth chest and opened his eyes. He could just make out the white tiles of the bathroom wall through the steam. The lips slowly slid down to his shoulder, lapping at the water dewed on his skin. He could feel thin strands of hair that were not his own against his cheek. The silky hair slid wetly off his face as the lips traveled upward again, stopping just over his ear.

"Trust me?" a husky voice asked almost sweetly.

"You know I do," Shadow answered with another smile. His eyes slid closed and he turned his head just enough to capture those lips with his own. The slippery slide of soft skin, a soft brush of tongues; he opened his eyes and looked into grey…

"Argh!" Shadow jerked awake with a startled scream.

Gasping, his heart rocketed in his chest. His eyes were wild and his mouth gaped open in desperate denial. Cheeks flushed with arousal, his groin burning with a deep aching need, he shuddered and flung himself from the bed. He stood there shaking, knowing he couldn't escape the dream just by leaving the bed, or the room, or even the castle.

"No… No..." he whispered desperately. A shaking hand tangled in the curls at his temple as he stared blindly forward. "No, can't be…"

Severus's words of weeks ago flashed through his mind; "In fact, I bet you don't even see Lockhart in these pleasant dreams. You merely relate the sensation to him."

And from only a few days ago: "I can name five people who have a good grasp of what you've been through and understand what is still in the future. All of them have chosen to stay by your side regardless. That suggests to me that not only is it possible for someone to understand and love you anyway, it has already happened."

Neville's voice rang in his ears: "The concept of someone loving you is hard to grasp, but what about you loving someone else? Can you imagine that?"

His own words rose up to taunt him: "Independence. I wouldn't want to constantly take care of some dainty girl. Humor, I guess. The ability to laugh at things. Intelligence and intuition; I wouldn't want
"Oh god." Shadow staggered, panic clutching at his chest, preventing him from drawing a full breath.

Had he been talking about Draco? It was true he couldn't imagine being with a girl, but he just thought that was because he hated the idea of a romantic relationship. However, he had no trouble imagining being with a boy. In fact, he knew first hand what being with a man was like. Certain he was going to throw up, Shadow clawed for self-control. He forced himself to breathe deeply, slowly, knowing he was going to faint soon if he didn't.

"No, I'm delusional. It was a mistake. A strange, twisted mistake from the dark, insane depths of my subconscious. It didn't mean anything."

Furious at himself, he screamed and conjured glass orbs to throw at his window. The crash of shattering glass was music to his ears. He did it again and again until there was a pile of sparkling shards coating the floor. Panting, dripping with sweat, he closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down.

"It was just a stupid dream," he said firmly.

He wouldn't let his fucked up mind ruin what little life he had managed to salvage for himself out of his cursed existence. Draco was his friend, his best fucking friend. He wouldn't let some godforsaken dream ruin it.

"It was just a stupid, fucked-up dream!"

Determined, he banished the broken glass and took out his piano. He played furiously for the rest of the night until the sun illuminated the water outside his window.

xXx

The rest of the week passed uneventfully. Word of the Hog's Head meeting slowly trickled to those with open ears. By Saturday, there was an almost buzzing tension in the air. Those ignorant believed it was caused by this being the first Hogsmeade weekend and didn't think twice. Those who knew better meandered around the village, eyes surreptitiously watching the clock and waiting for noon.

Shadow and Draco arrived almost half an hour early to scope out the place. On a Saturday when the whole village was aware that Hogwarts students would be wandering around, the bar was practically empty. There were only four people in evidence, not counting the barkeep: two hooded people sitting in a shadowed corner, a veiled woman sitting alone in a second, and a man at the bar who had his head concealed by grey bandages.

The two Slytherins took up a small room that was toward the back. It had a curtain across the archway so they could pull it closed once everyone had arrived. Shadow prowled around the space, already laying down some basic wards. They took easily since there was years of privacy-spell residue already embedded into the wood. Draco was busy rearranging the small, filthy, and banged up wooden tables and equally decrepitated benches so that there was a space for a few stools at the front, giving the small room a classroom-type feel.

"Are you ready?" Draco asked as he settled at the table nearest the stools.

He looked his friend over carefully. The brunet had been quiet for the last few days and Draco knew that look. Shadow was inside himself, lost in his tangled thoughts. Draco hadn't pried because he knew Shadow needed space to contemplate things, but now wasn't the time for thinking. Their plans
depended on this meeting going well. He needed Shadow present and fully engaged.

Shadow’s eyes sharpened on Draco, almost cutting into him they were so sharp. A slow smile slid across his face. "I'm ready."

Draco grinned back. He was almost vibrating with anticipation. This was it. Today they were moving their plans forward; today everything would no longer be just talk and plans, it would be reality.

Their focus shifted as someone approached the open curtain. The barkeep looked both teenagers over. He was dressed in a worn, billowy, long-sleeved shirt and stained brown pants. He carried a dirty dishrag in his hand. He was tall and thin with scraggly grey hair that fell down his back. He had some stubble on his cheeks and squinty blue eyes.

Shadow narrowed his eyes suspiciously. There was something familiar about the man that he couldn't quite place.

"Can I help you, boys?" the man asked roughly, obviously unhappy with them being there.

"Two butterbeers," Draco said with a superior sneer. His hand - which was resting at his side casually - subtly shifted to emphasize the wand it held.

The barkeep seemed unimpressed with the display and turned his attention to the curly-haired teen. Shadow said nothing, but he continued to stare at the man. He sat on a stool, his school bag at his feet. His wand wasn’t in sight. The barkeep was about to bark at them to get out of his bar when Shadow absentmindedly brushed a few curls off his forehead, allowing light to briefly touch his eyes.

"Four Sickles," the man said quickly, his demeanor completely changed, now almost apprehensive.

Draco gracefully stood and handed over the required amount. The man left without looking back. The blond lifted an eyebrow at his friend, an amused smirk on his lips. "I'm going to have to take you out more often."

Shadow laughed loudly.

xXx

Shadow and Draco's butterbeers were delivered just as the bar door opened admitting a small gaggle of Hogwarts students. Neville and Ginny entered first. Neville spotted them and walked across without hesitation with his girlfriend following in his wake. Shadow smiled at his brother as he casually took a seat at the same table as Draco, though not the seat directly next to him. He had appearances to maintain, after all.

Hermione and Ron followed his example, sitting at the table with the Slytherin but not next to him. When Dean and Lavender arrived they looked to be having second thoughts when they saw Draco. The Patil twins came up behind them with Cho Chang and another Ravenclaw sixth year that Shadow didn’t know. They all hesitated in the doorway.

"This isn't about Houses," Shadow spoke calmly to the uneasy group. "This is about learning to defend ourselves. We all have a right to learn that."

"Oh, sit down," Hermione said with a huff and a roll of her eyes. "It's not like Malfoy's going to attack you."
"Too many witnesses for one," Ron muttered darkly, glowering at the blond Slytherin.

"Because it's not in his best interest," Neville countered, eyes narrowed at the redhead in annoyance. "We're all afraid."

"Speak for yourself, Longbottom," Draco said with a scowl. "I merely want to be prepared."

Ginny snorted at the blond who was obviously in denial.

The others relaxed at this interchange enough to take seats. Luna arrived next, looking dreamy as she took the ostracized seat next to Draco. She smiled sweetly and the Slytherin nodded stiffly, managing to conceal a look of distain for the flighty girl under Shadow's watchful gaze.

"Hermione, you're helping with this, so why don't you sit up here with me?" Shadow asked, pleased things were going well so far.

The girl blushed, but she stood and took the stool next to Shadow. He smiled at her and began a quiet conversation about secrecy spells and such. Hermione answered enthusiastically, also bringing up a few things she had been thinking about, like how they would communicate with each other without being caught. The others took her cue and began small conversations as they waited.

The soft murmur died, however, with the appearance of more Slytherins. Rogan Harper, Miles Bletchy, Lillian Derrick, and Blaise Zabini met everyone's startled and suspicious stares with cool, blank masks. As one they moved to take the seats directly behind Draco. The Ravenclaws moved from their seats to put more space between them, earning sneers from the Slytherins.

Shadow rolled his eyes and shook his head sadly. Hermione laughed at this. The tension didn't have time to build as several more people arrived: Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson; Colin and Dennis Creevey; Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, and another Ravenclaw girl with a long braid down her back whose name Shadow didn't know; Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, and Terry Boot; a boy with an upturned nose that Shadow recognized from the Hufflepuff Quidditch team and Fred and George with their friend Lee Jordan.

"Wow," Shadow said with honest wonder as he looked at everyone squeezed into the tiny room. "I didn't expect so many people to be interested in this."

"Is that a problem?" the twins grinned as they began passing out the butterbeers they had fetched while everyone was getting settled. Once that was done they pulled the curtains closed, activating the wards that Shadow had prepared.

"Not at all," Hermione said happily. "This is great! The more people the better when it comes to practice."

"Practice what exactly?" Anthony Goldstein called from the back.

"First thing's first." Shadow stood and gestured to the divide that separated the others from the Slytherins despite the tight quarters. "This cannot continue. At least, not while in this group. What House you're in doesn't matter here. Learning to defend yourself and your friends from attack is what's important."

"But they're Death Eaters," a Hufflepuff said fearfully.

Draco stood and calmly rolled up his sleeves. His arms were smooth and unmarked. "I am not a Death Eater. Slytherin does not equal Death Eater. That's bigotry, if you didn't notice, and I'm sick of it. We aren't evil. In fact, more of us would be openly less hostile if the other Houses didn't target us..."
"So doggedly."

"Ha! Bigotry!" Ernie Macmillan called angrily, jumping to his own feet as well. "Your father…!"

"My father is just that. My father." Draco glared coldly into the other boy's eyes. "I am myself, thank you very much. I'm capable of making my own decisions, and that's what I'm doing."

"Needless to say, that's none of your business really." Shadow interrupted. He cast his strange eyes among all of them, collecting their complete attention with that simple gaze. There was an intensity about him that drew them in. "There are Gryffindor Death Eaters, cruel Hufflepuffs, and sadistic Ravenclaws. None of this matters. I'm not asking you where your loyalty lies, so we don't need to ask the Slytherins, either. We're here because we want to form a group to learn defense. This isn't about politics or family history. This is about protecting ourselves."

"I've been thinking," Hermione said, adding her voice. "Maybe because Shadow hasn't been here since he's been eleven, he has a clearer perspective about the Houses. I mean, none of us shy away from him even though he's Slytherin, too. We don't really think it counts somehow because he hasn't grown up here. And that's made me realize that if we were Sorted now, it wouldn't work. None of us are simple kids anymore. Think about it. Can you so easily classify your parents' friends into Houses? Adults aren't that easy to categorize. So are we adults or are we still children?"

"You're right, Hermione. I do look at the House system differently than you guys do." Shadow shrugged. "I don't care about House rivalry at school, sometimes it's even funny, but if you guys are serious about this group, that crap has to be left outside the door when we meet. Otherwise this will be pointless."

"But how can we trust them?" Cho asked.

"You don't have to make them your best friends. I don't think they really want that," Shadow said with a laugh as he saw the sneers this got from the Slytherin quarter. "This is just a defense group."

"But they'll be casting spells at us, won't they?" Ernie protested.

"Just like everyone else will be." Shadow's eyes began to glitter with annoyance. "By necessity, we will be casting spells, curses, and hexes at each other to practice defending ourselves."

"But what if they cast something Dark," an unknown Ravenclaw girl pressed.

"Look, we're not going to be practicing alone," Shadow explained as if to very stupid children. "We're all going to be watching and learning from each other. There's no point in purposely trying to hurt each other when so many will be there to retaliate."

"I think this group is important. It might even save our lives one day," Hermione said firmly. "Harry's getting training and so should we. If you can't deal with working with everyone here, then leave now. Those of us who are taking this seriously want to learn and don't have time to mess around."

"Hear, hear!" the twins bellowed, knocking their mugs together.

There was muttering at this, but no one stood to leave. Shadow waited for them to settle down. He caught Draco's eye and the blond answered with a ghost of a smile. They had anticipated this struggle, but it was very frustrating how much the others resisted the idea of working with Slytherins.

A hand went up in the back. "You mentioned Harry training. You mean the rumors are true? I thought… Why would he…?" The boy couldn't get out what he was trying to say.
"What's he training for?" Justin asked for his friend. "I thought it was Black behind all those Dark Mark sightings and Death Eater raids."

Shadow looked at their faces, some tight with disbelief and others with fear. He figured only the Gryffindors weren't buying the Ministry's crap, and some of them still looked doubtful as well.

"Lord Voldemort is back," Hermione said defiantly. "Harry fought him after the Triwizard Tournament."

There were gasps and cries of outrage at this. In seconds the argument was heating up to something unpleasant - a few Gryffindors against the rest of the group. The Slytherins tried to stay out of it, even though they all knew the truth about the Dark Lord's resurrection. Shadow cast a noisy blast of fireworks from his wand and everyone turned to him shocked.

"You aren't listening," he said darkly. "This group isn't about politics. Whether we use this group to actually pass our OWLs and NEWTs because Umbridge's class is worthless or we are here to learn to literally defend ourselves one day, it doesn't matter. The fact is that there is Death Eater activity. Does it really matter if it's You-Know-Who or just an average Death Eater behind it all? You'll be dead either way. The truth, whatever it is, will come out eventually, so it's best to be prepared in my opinion."

Hermione scowled at this, her face turning red with anger. "But it's true!"

"Maybe," Shadow said and continued over the noises of denial this provoked from the others. "But that's not what this is about. Is that clear to everyone? Keep your beliefs to yourself. This is a defense group."

"Kinda bossy, isn't he? Definitely Snape's son," Lee said loudly to the twins. "Feel like I'm joining a non-partisan army. Weird."

"We never liked domineering people…” Fred wrinkled his nose.

"… But this sounds important…” George crossed his arms and nodded once.

"…We'll play soldier for a little while…” Fred snapped off a salute.

"… Just to see if we'll learn anything interesting," George concluded with a wicked grin.

Shadow laughed. "Oh, I promise it'll be interesting. And it's not going to be like an army at all. It'll be fun, but it'll be focused, too. We all know Umbridge won't like this group being active, so the time we manage to sneak away together to practice will be limited. No use wasting it arguing when you can do that in the halls or after class."

There were nods of agreement to this. It made sense.

"We could get into a lot of trouble," the Ravenclaw girl next to Cho said. "We all saw what she did to punish us for not telling on Fred and George. I thought this would be more like a study group. This all seems a little… extreme."

"I'm glad you brought that up," Shadow said with a smile. "Hermione thought of something really great to make sure Umbridge doesn't find out about us."

She nodded and explained her idea. "I found this Secrecy-Binding Spell in the library. I've already activated it on this parchment." She bent over to retrieve a blank scroll from her backpack. "Whoever wants to join this group has to sign their name. Doing so will ensure their silence. They won't be able
to talk about the secret - this group, in this case - with anyone not on the list. That way we'll be protected and not have to worry about anyone snitching and getting us in trouble."

"I don't know…"

"That's sound Dark to me…"

"Seems a bit much…"

The mutters faded and went, but mostly everyone seemed reluctant to join the group.

Shadow decided that they had enough to think over. He clapped his hands. "I think everything that has to be said has been." He smiled at them, trying to look harmless as he ruffled his curls. "It should be fun and we should learn a lot about defense and dueling, things like the Patronus, shields, and barriers. If you're interested, meet us at the portrait of Barnabas and the Ballet Trolls on the seventh floor Wednesday night at 7:30. We'll sign the scroll and I'll take you to the secret room I've found."

Really it was Draco who stumbled on the perfect place. He had been late for class on Friday and urgently had to use the bathroom when a door suddenly appeared next to him. Inside was a room full of toilets. He had summoned Dobby and asked what it was and the elf had informed him that it was the Room of Requirement. There had been no removing the blond's smug expression all night after that, Shadow recalled with a smile.

The sound of talking and chairs scraping as everyone got up to leave filled the room. Shadow watched them go, wondering how many would show up. About twenty-eight students were there now, he hoped at least half would show up on Wednesday. He had no doubt that once the group got underway word would spread and they'd get more members, but they had to have members in the first place in order for that to happen.

"I'll be there," Dean Thomas suddenly spoke up, halting everyone as they looked back at him. "My father was killed by Death Eaters. I don't want that to happen to me or my friends, so I'll be there."

"Me, too," Neville said with a firm nod at Dean, his shyness giving way to a deep confidence. Shadow couldn't help smiling at his brother.

"I'm going," Ginny said as she took her boyfriend's hand.

"We can't pass up a chance…" "…to learn about a secret room!" the twins cried excitedly.

"I'll be there, of course," Draco drawled, flicking his fingers. "This war's already at my doorstep."

"I'm helping to plan it, so of course I'll be there." Hermione stared pointedly at Ron.

"Course I'll be there," the redhead told her with surprise.

"Even if it means working with Malfoy?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yeah." Ron sighed. He looked over at the blond with distaste. "I suppose so."

"I think it will be lots of fun," Luna said with a sweet smile.

There were shared glances among the others, but there were no more declarations and they continued to trickle out of the bar, walking slowly back to school or continuing to visit Hogsmeade. There was a lot to think about for all of them.

"Fred! George!" Shadow called. The twins turned as one and lifted eyebrows curiously. The brunet
gestured them back and shot Draco a glance. The blond nodded and slipped out of the side room to
give them privacy. He didn't go far, though, only stepping up to the bar and ordering another drink.

"You called?" Fred asked with a wide grin, bowing dramatically.

Shadow pinned his strange gaze on the two Gryffindors. He couldn't see anything wrong with them.
They looked normal, even down to their intelligent and mischievous blue eyes and easy grins, but
Shadow didn't trust that. Cheating, he focused his Empath ability as tightly as it could go. He didn't
dare open it all the way - he'd be submerged in all the emotions of everyone in the town - but he
wanted to know the honest gut reactions to the questions he was about to ask.

"How are the detentions going?"

Tonight would be their fifth; they had been going to Umbridge since they confessed on Tuesday. In
response, cold determination, hot defiance, and an earthy sense of stubborn endurance filled his
senses, but the twins' faces didn't betray them just as Shadow had predicted. They smiled identical
smiles that didn't match the dark conglomeration that flared around them at the mention of their
punishment.

"Nothing we can't handle," Fred proclaimed.

"We'll let her build up the debt she owes," George nodded. "That way when Karma comes around
for her…"

"… it'll bite off her head and not just nip her in the ass!" Fred laughed, playfully hitting Shadows
shoulder and lifting his eyebrows rapidly in a knowing leer. "Get us?"

"I get you." Shadow smiled. "I'm still sorry."

"Don't be." George waved him off, the tension around his eyes relaxing. "The Headmistress talked
to Miss Toad and told her that a month of detentions every single night was too much."

"It might interfere with our grades," Fred said in a stage whisper, eyes sparkling.

"So we got it cut back to three times a week." George chuckled.


"Do you need anything? Healing potions?" Shadow fished, his empathy still open.

"Nah." George smiled crookedly and tousled Shadow's curls affectionately. "We're pretty good at
that stuff ourselves. Don't worry about us, mate. You've got your hands full. We can take care of
ourselves."

"Besides, the detentions give us great material for future pranks!" Fred proclaimed happily.

"About that. I think we should stop the pranks until we have a stronger defense against her," Shadow
explained. "We're just playing into her hands by provoking her now."


"I mean it, Fred." Shadow narrowed his eyes. "A lot more is at stake now with trying to get this
group off the ground. We can't afford the extra attention. It's time to lay low and protect our real
interests; the defense group and something else I have up my sleeve."

"Okay," George said seriously. "We'll back off."
"Not forever," Shadow reassured, feeling the strong disappointment and the chaffing rage in Fred. The redhead really wanted to get back at their tormentor. "We're going to bring her down, but first we have to build a base to attack her from."

"Fine," Fred conceded reluctantly.

George tapped his chin thoughtfully, looking at the ceiling. "I guess we could turn our attention back to the spying Muggle devices you gave us. We could finish magic-proofing them and have Padfoot plant them at HQ."

"Haven't been getting much info from that area recently." Fred nodded, excited again. He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "I wonder what juicy stuff we'll overhear now that all the kids are out of the building and they think they're safe from being overheard."

"Good idea." Shadow laughed. "Thanks, guys."

"No problem, mate." George smiled and tossed a wave over his shoulder.

The twins exited the pub, heads together, deep in their mischievous plots. Shadow watched them go, promising himself he'd keep an eye on them. Draco approached and tilted his head curiously, offering a butterbeer. Shadow took it, sighing tiredly.

"They didn't say what she was doing, but I didn't sense too much pain; mostly determination and a deep grudge. It'll turn into hate pretty soon, but the good news is that instead of detention every night, they got it cut back to three times a week."

"That's something," Draco agreed, sitting on the table in front of the brunet.

Shadow sat on his stool and took a sip at his drink. He felt very focused. His mind raced with plans and calculations. "More people showed up today than I expected, but I was hoping for more enthusiasm," he admitted.

"I think more people will show up than you think."

"I'm also surprised at how many people don't believe Tom's back. They need to be told. How else are they going to protect themselves and prepare?"

"What are you thinking?" Draco frowned, hooking a stray lock of hair behind his ear.

Shadow looked into his steel-colored eyes. "I'm thinking Harry Potter needs to get the word out."

The blond arched an eyebrow in interest as his friend began to smile.

xXx

Melissa Silverwood stormed from the Witch's Weekly office, her long honey-colored hair streaming out behind her. Last night she had received a letter from Harry Potter. He apologized for not giving her the promised interview after the third task and hoped this would make up for it. In the longmissive that followed, the teen described in detail the horrendous events of June 24th. He explained that he was writing now because he had just received word that the Ministry was saying the Dark Lord wasn't back. He wanted to let people know the truth and to apologize for disappearing.

She remembered the thin fourteen-year-old boy she had interviewed twice. She found him adorable with his messy dark hair and eyes too old before their time. She felt personally offended at Rita Skeeter's manipulations and journalistic abuse of the poor teen and swore she would represent him.
fairly. Then the world seemed to turn against him, as if he had asked to be a part of that bloody tournament. Melissa couldn't believe it and did all she could to turn public opinion back to Harry's side.

Now he was counting on her more than ever. She wouldn't let him down! If Witch's Weekly wouldn't take the risk of upsetting the damned Ministry of Magic to report the truth, then she would find a paper that would. Tightly clutching her purse that held the long account of Harry Potter, The Boy-Who-Lived, Melissa set out on her mission.

xXx

Draco and Shadow were sitting by the fire Sunday night, reading their respective Potions texts when Severus Flooed into the common room. Shadow didn't look up and Draco frowned. He had asked earlier why Shadow wasn't going to Severus's quarters for therapy and Shadow had answered that he was taking a break this week. Draco had thought that strange. Severus wasn't the type to give his students breaks, but he hadn't pushed it. Now he wished he had. Severus obviously wasn't happy.

"Your OWL results have arrived. I expected to give them to you when you came by, but to my surprise, I realized you had no intention of coming."

Shadow refused to meet his father's eyes. "I had a lot of homework to catch up on."

"I see," Severus said coolly. "You will come next Sunday." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir." Shadow sighed and reached for the scroll.

Severus passed it over. "Congratulations."

Shadow flushed, his eyes snapping up to meet his father's, but there was no mockery there. Severus was completely sincere. Feeling even guiltier for not attending his therapy session, he took the scroll and opened it. Draco leaned over his shoulder and Shadow tilted the paper to make it easier for the blond to read. His scores stared up at him: Charms- E, Defense Against the Dark Arts- O, Potions- O. Shadow smiled, feeling a rush of accomplishment.

Draco sniffed and turned back to his books. "You know, those don't really count."

"What do you mean?" Shadow asked, smiling at his friend's antics. "You're just jealous I'm smarter than you."

"You're in Seventh-year DADA and Potions," Draco replied with a smirk. "If a Seventh-year took their OWLS again, of course they would get Os. The real question is, what will you get on your NEWTs?"

"Oh, shut it." Shadow laughed and hit the blond's shoulder with the rolled up scroll.

"Draco has a point," Severus murmured, bringing his hand up to stroke his pointed chin.

Shadow glowered up at his father, knowing the man was just getting even for him skipping out on their session.

Severus relented and a rare smile brushed his lips. "But considering your age, I think the marks are impressive no matter how you look at it. You did well and I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," Shadow said softly, surprised at how good that made him feel. "And… I'm sorry."
Severus nodded and left the teens to their work.

Draco shifted his eyes over to the brunet. "Why didn't you go?"

Shadow said nothing. He stared down at his book blankly, his fingers white where he gripped it. He remembered his dream and felt a cold sweat breakout on his brow and the feeling of ants crawling around his insides started up as his anxiety rushed back. He *definitely* didn't want Severus to find out what he’d dreamed, and he wasn't confident he could hide it since the dream was still so fresh. Maybe by next Sunday he’d feel safer going.

Draco watched him for a moment before swinging his legs up into Shadow's lap, startling the brunet. "Quiz me on my antidotes," he demanded.

Shadow rolled his eyes with a put-upon sigh and took Draco's book. The blond smiled faintly as he watched the tension drain from his friend's tight shoulders. Shadow caught the smile and gratitude shimmered briefly through his strange eyes before he began to mercilessly tease the blond every time he answered his questions wrong.

xXx

"You're a bloody bastard," Draco muttered as they walked to dinner an hour later.

Shadow laughed and bumped the blond's shoulder with his own. "You should be careful what you ask for. Think of it as a learning experience. Next time you won't ask me to quiz you."

"He has you there, Draco," Blaise said. He came up from behind the two and wrapped his arms around their necks, sliding in-between them. "What were you thinking? He is a Snape and we all know how Snapes teach."

"Traitor." Draco scowled at his friend.

Blaise merely smiled as Shadow laughed, his eyes sparkling with lighthearted fun.

They entered the Great Hall and headed over to their seats. Happy chatter filled the Hall as everyone ate and talked about their weekend and complained about the week ahead full of homework and tests. Shadow and Miles were discussing chess moves when Umbridge stood up, tapping her glass to get everyone's attention. Shadow shot a look at the Headmistress as silence descended. McGonagall didn't look happy.

"May I have your attention please?" Umbridge called with a big smile. "It has come to my attention that there may be a few dissidents having secret meetings. It is a shame that the behavior of a few must penalize the school as a whole, but I must hereby inform you that all student organizations, Societies, teams, groups, and clubs are disbanded.

"The Headmistress is a busy woman, so in her stead I will graciously hear out requests to form such groups. This means no gatherings of more than three students without my permission as High Inquisitor. Anyone who violates this edict will be summarily expelled. I will post the decree on the wall in the Entrance Hall to be sure everyone sees it. Thank you."

There was absolute silence for half a minute before agitated exclamations broke out across the Hall. Shadow sat silent and still in the midst of unhappy murmurs as he stared at the hated woman.

Umbridge met his gaze and sat with a satisfied smile, practically feeding off her show of power.

Shadow knew three things. One: this was because of the Hogs Head meeting; somehow she had found out. Two: she was afraid of such a group or else she wouldn't have acted so quickly and
decisively. Three: he was going to make sure the defense group worked if it was the last thing he did.

xXx

There was another disruption at breakfast the next morning. Post came and sleepy-eyed students hardly noticed, but slowly you could feel it in the air as attentions sharpened. The Hall grew quieter as people began to read in earnest. Suddenly students were grouping together to read over the shoulders of the few who had subscriptions to *The Quibbler*.

**HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST:**

"*The Truth About HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED And The Night I Saw Him Returned*

Hermione grabbed Lavender's edition, much to the girl's protest, and read it avidly. There was no mention of the temple or China. Harry merely wrote that he was staying with his rescuers for special training. He said he had only just received word that the Ministry didn't believe the Dark Lord was back and wanted to warn them. The detail of the third task and the battle in the graveyard was considerably greater than that in the letters he had written them, probably because more time had passed since then. Hopefully that meant he was recovering from the horrific experience.

Ron was looking over her shoulder and muttering the phrases that most sounded like their friend. Hermione had to admit it *did* sound like Harry. Maybe she was worrying over nothing. It was true she paid more attention to detail than her friend. He could have made an honest mistake in the letter to them. Certainly the Death Eaters wouldn't want this article printed because it would give people hope and open their eyes to the truth.

"I told you You-Know-Who was back!" Dean crowed triumphantly at a sullen Seamus.

"Maybe," the Irish boy said doubtfully. "Don't really know if that was Harry, do we?"

There were mixed feelings at Slytherin table as well.

"Guess the rumors were true," Rogan said thoughtfully as he looked over Lillian's shoulder. "Potter is training somewhere."

"Won't do him much good." Theodore Nott snorted. "If you ask me, Potter's not training. He's hiding because he knows he can't win this war."

"Not too bright, is he?" Millicent frowned. "If he keeps writing the papers, he's going to get himself killed. His hiding spot's not going to be secret much longer."

Over at the Ravenclaw table, there was a different variety of complaint.

"It's probably not true," muttered Eddie Carmichael. "That magazine is trash and filled with lies."

"Daddy wouldn't print lies," Luna argued. "And some very interesting things can be found in the trash."

Hufflepuff table was filled with different murmurs.

"Why's he got to train in secret? Why can't he train here?" Justin Finch-Fletchley asked.

"He's abandoned us," Logan Summers said fearfully.
But as many people disbelieved the article or criticized Harry, there were several thoughtful faces and a few more filled with fearful belief than before. Shadow noticed all this and smiled internally. *Checkmate.* He had a feeling more people were going to show up for Wednesday's meeting than there would have been before the article, even with the threat of expulsion.

Draco caught his eye and slyly tipped his head toward the four-page article Pansy was holding. "What do you think about it?"

"I think this Potter character is interesting," Shadow responded with a smooth smile, making Draco laugh. Feeling satisfied, he turned his attention to his own mail. He slit open the scroll an owl dropped next to his plate. It was from Sirius.

*Hey, pup.*

*Word to the wise. Umbridge has spies at Hogsmeade. Barkeep at Hog's Head said some Ministry goon came asking around about a large group of students that met there. Mundungus, the greedy rat, was there. He was the one in a long veil, sitting alone. He told the goon for a few Galleons that the students were talking about Defense as they were leaving, so I'm sure word has already gotten back to Umbridge by now. Luckily, he isn't completely stupid - knowing he'd get in real trouble for selling you out completely and didn't reveal the identity of anyone who attended. As for me, no news on my mission, but I have a few fresh leads. Still searching for them.*

*Raise hell for me!*

*Padfoot*

Shadow showed the note to Draco before incinerating it. The blond nodded, smirking. Now that they knew for sure how the bitch found out about their meeting, they were confident they could keep future meetings secret. Umbridge couldn't possibly watch all of Hogwarts like she could watch Hogsmeade. The Room of Requirement would also help protect them. They'd be safe from her there. It was a bit discouraging that Sirius had found no solid leads yet about the Horcruxes, but that was to be expected. A search that big would take time.

*Chapter end.*
Hushed discussions and arguments were flying fast and furious all day. All anyone could talk about was the article. It came as no surprise to Shadow that by Tuesday morning there was another decree from the High Inquisitor hanging in the Entrance Hall: Any student found in possession of the magazine would be expelled.

Draco laughed when he saw this. "The stupid bitch just made sure everyone will read and re-read that article."

"And," Shadow said with a large grin, "she just made it twice as believable. She wouldn't be bothered by it if it weren't true, after all."

"You are a genius," Draco said with admiration, making his eyes go wide and adoring.

Shadow laughed, firmly ignoring the twinge in his chest. "Yeah, well, I had to do something. I couldn't have you showing me up all the time with your brilliant plans for the defense group."

"Good point." The blond nodded solemnly.

"Shut up, Serpentine, and get to class." Shadow shook his head with a fond smile, pushing the now-laughing blond down the hall before going in the opposite direction.

Draco watched him go, feeling truly happy for the first time since they were alone at Snape House. It seemed that ever since Neville had arrived that summer, it was always one thing after another. He just hoped their recent good luck held.

xXx

Shadow was once more walking down the windowless corridor, his bare feet slapping against the cool stone floor. As the door at the end of the passage loomed larger, his pale hands reached out with bloodthirsty lust to throw it open and force Demon into submission, to own the powerful entity… If he could only open it…

The teen sat up with a gasp, hand clutching his chest over the burning lightning bolt scar. He felt sick, but knowing the desire for Demon wasn't his own helped calm him. Scrunching his brow in thought, he tried to grasp what he was missing. There was a niggling feeling at the back of his mind that just wouldn't… Eyes wide, he flung the covers off and ran for his door.

It was two o'clock in the morning. There was no one up to see his mad dash for his father's quarters. The front door was keyed to open for him and he went through, not bothering to knock. He ran up to Severus's bedroom and pounded on the door. The Potion Master flung it open, his wand held at ready.

"Dad! I dreamed it again. Of the corridor and wanting Demon, you know, and I think I know what's going on!"

"Calm down," Severus said as he towed his son over to the couch and lit a fire. He turned back looking grim. "Now slowly. What are you saying?"

"The corridor! I recognize it. It's the one from the Ministry. The one under the Entrance level. We
crossed through it briefly to take the stairs to courtroom ten. Remember? The long empty one with the door at the end? It kind of looks like Demon's old door, doesn't it? But Demon doesn't have a door like that anymore, you see? He has the cellar in the ground now."

"And this means…?" Severus demanded.

Shadow took a deep breath, trying to make himself understandable. "I think I know which part of the dream is mine and which part is Tom's. I think Tom wants something at the end of that corridor in the Ministry really badly. I think I was conjuring Demon as what he wants because that's what I'm afraid of and because the stone door reminded me of Demon, but I think Tom is after something else. Something he wants just as much as he wants Demon. Or maybe he wants what's behind the door because it will get him Demon. I'm not sure. But I'm confident that Tom is dreaming of that Ministry corridor and wants something beyond that stone door."

"I see." Severus paled, his face going utterly blank as it did whenever he was afraid. "The door you are suggesting is the door to the Department of Mysteries."

Shadow tilted his head anxiously. "What would he want there?"

"I was worried this would happen." Severus paced the floor twice before he met his son's eyes bleakly. "I believe the Dark Lord is after the whole prophecy, which is stored in the Department of Mysteries. He only knows the beginning. Maybe he hopes the rest will tell him a way to defeat you without killing you, since he believes you hold the dark power he craves. In any case, he cannot be allowed to hear the rest."

"Why?" Shadow asked softly, studying his father's face. "There's something more to this that you're not saying."

"I've been reevaluating the prophecy," Severus admitted. He ran his hands through his hair and covered his eyes briefly. "If I am correct…"

"What?" Shadow demanded. "Tell me!"

"It says, 'Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.' What if it is referring not to two people, but three? For example, that neither Demon nor the Dark Lord can live while you survive. Or it could be that neither you nor the Dark Lord can live while Demon survives. Or any other combination. In any case, my fear is that the prophecy will reveal that you and Demon are separate entities. As of now, the Dark Lord thinks you became Demon because you were hurt and angry; you were pushed. If he discovers that he could possibly strip Demon from you, things will be far, far worse for us. The Dark Lord is knowledgeable of many dark rituals; it will only be a matter of time before Demon is his."

Shadow shivered in dread, his arms coming up to wrap around his thin chest. Under no circumstance could they allow the Dark Lord to possess Demon's power. If that were to happen, Hell would reign on earth. "We have to tell someone," he said, eyes wide and frightened.

"I agree." Severus stepped forward and gripped his son's shoulder firmly. "Things are not hopeless yet. We are forewarned and won't allow the Dark Lord to succeed. We've fought too hard and lost too much to allow it."

Shadow laughed weakly, still feeling shaky but bolstered by his father's conviction. "You sound like a Gryffindor."

Severus sneered, but his eyes sparkled with amusement. "Take my bed. Sleeping potion is in the
drawer of the nightstand. I doubt I'll be back before morning."

Shadow nodded, his thoughts swirling, and did as he was told. He hoped his father was right.

xXx

"Minerva!" Severus called sharply as he stepped into the Headmistress's office.

The door at the top of a second staircase opened quickly. McGonagall stood at the top, wrapped in a robe. Her long, thin hair fell around her shoulders, but her eyes were alert and her wand was in her hand despite it being obvious she had just come from bed.

"Severus, what is it?" she asked sharply, coming down to meet him.

"I've just received a missive from Potter," he told her gravely. He showed her his hand, his fingertips burnt. "It self-immolated as soon as I finished reading it."

"What did it say? And why would he write you?" McGonagall demanded even as she took the injured hand and began casting healing spells on it.

"Potter and I formed a rapport of a kind in his many detentions over the years," Severus drawled with a wry smile. "And my appearances and manner mark me as someone who might be familiar with the Dark. He didn't know anyone else he could possible deliver his message to and be confident it would be believed."

"And?" she asked, holding her breath.

"It seems he is being taught a type of meditation to enter the connection between himself and the Dark Lord via his curse scar."

McGonagall gasped.

"In his dream, he watches the Dark Lord travel down a long stone corridor. At the end, there is a large stone door and the Dark Lord wants what is behind it very badly. The monks Potter is with cast a divination and told him that the Dark Lord must not gain what he seeks or it will be the end."

"A stone corridor?" she frowned fiercely. "Didn't he say anything more specific?"

Severus shook his head sharply. "Just that it was deep underground. I believe I know what he seeks."

"What?" McGonagall grasped his shoulders in her anxiety.

"The whole prophecy."

"Dear god." McGonagall strode to her desk and yanked out a crystal pyramid paperweight. With a muttered word, it began to glow golden. She held it, waiting patiently. "I didn't even think about that. I wish we could destroy it."

"Only the Dark Lord or Potter can touch the prophecy orb," Severus said with equal regret.

"Then we'll just have to guard it." McGonagall met his eyes with steely determination. "Thank you, Severus. Please inform me if anymore letters come your way."

"Of course." Severus bowed from the waist and left her whispering to the pyramid.
Wednesday after dinner, Draco and Shadow waited by the portrait of Barnabas for the others who wanted to be in the defense group. They were talking in low tones about the prophecy and the Order guarding the corridor when groups of three and four students began trickling into the seventh floor hallway. Shadow smiled as Hermione stood next to him, head held high. Twenty minutes later, he decided that everyone was there who wanted to be.

"Okay, this way," Shadow said and led them forward. There were gasps of awe as a door materialized in front of them. Shadow turned the handle and gestured for everyone to go inside.

The walls were lined with wooden bookcases. Instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large, cracked Foe-Glass. There was also a dueling area, warded to protect the rest of the room from stray spells.

Shadow locked the door behind him and walked over. Everyone followed, talking excitedly about the room. He gestured Hermione to stay standing while everyone else found a cushion to sit on. There was still a small space between the Slytherins and the other Houses, but at least no one was glaring at each other suspiciously.

"Okay, we need to sign the Secrecy Scroll, but not all of us. I want you all to vote for one person from each House that you feel can be trusted without a doubt to keep this secret on their own. That way they can answer questions for anyone new who wants to join, but I warn you. Choose wisely. Don't pick someone who might tell Umbridge. We don't want to get caught and expelled."

"Good idea, Shadow!" Hermione smiled at him and hurried over to the knot of Gryffindors to discuss who should represent Gryffindor. It didn't take long. Everyone voted for Hermione. Blushing, she returned to Shadow's side.

He laughed at her. "Did you expect something different? You are the one who is helping and everyone knows how you feel about Umbridge. She hurt you more than anyone else. You won't tell her."

Hermione's blush deepened. A few minutes later Seventh-year Brandy Cadwallader, a Hufflepuff Chaser, and Fifth-year Ravenclaw Padma Patil were elected. Shadow handed over the scroll to those who hadn't been chosen and made sure everyone signed. When that was done, he saw that there were twenty-four names, which didn't include the three others who didn't sign. That was more than the number of people who attended the meeting at Hog's Head!

"Okay." He smiled at them and took out a second parchment. "I want you all to write down things that you want to learn and we'll work through the list as we go. If someone already wrote down something that you were going to suggest, put a tally mark next to it. We'll start on the things with the most votes first."

This parchment was more eagerly accepted than the last and everyone huddled around it, talking excitedly.

"I was thinking," Hermione said to Shadow. "We should have a name. It'll promote a team spirit."

"Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?" Angelina asked hopefully, overhearing. She was still furious that the Gryffindor Quidditch team hadn't been given permission by Umbridge to play. They were the only ones refused, resulting in the whole team coming tonight. They suspected they were denied in part because of the twins, but also because Umbridge wanted to stick it to the
Headmistress. Gryffindor wasn't happy, to say the least.

"Or the Ministry of Magic Are Morons Group?" Fred suggested with a grin.

"I was thinking of a name that didn't tell everyone what we were up to," Hermione argued, shaking her head, "so that the House Representatives can safely talk about it to others who might want to join."

"The Defense Association?" Cho offered shyly. "That's what we're here for, right?"

"Yeah, the D.A. for short. I like it," Ginny agreed.

"All in favor of the D.A.?" Hermione called and there was a yell to the affirmative. "Okay. That's a majority - motion passed!"

Shadow laughed at her and she flushed a little, but she didn't back down as she emblazoned the name **Defense Association** in gold over the top of the Secrecy Scroll and used a sticking charm to post it on the wall. Shadow looked over at Draco and the blond smirked at him. Things were going perfectly. They didn't even need to plant anti-Ministry seeds; Umbridge was doing it for them.

"Right," Shadow called, gesturing for everyone to quiet down. "Shall we get practicing then?" He looked at the suggestions scrawled on scroll. "You all want to learn Disarming Spells. Okay. Everyone split up into pairs. We'll do Expelliarmus first. Anyone who already knows how to do this spell come here, you'll help with the others."

Draco, Blaise, Rogan, Fred, George, and Fifth-year Ravenclaw Anthony Goldstein stepped up to him. The seven of them walked up and down the lines of students trying to help with pronunciation and wand movement. Shadow watched how the others would tense when a Slytherin came up to help, but no one said anything. It was a start.

Thirty minutes later, everyone was beginning to get the hang of the spell when Shadow blew hard on the whistle that appeared in his hand. "That was pretty good for the first day, but we're out of time. Curfew is in thirty minutes. Same time, same place next week?"

"Sooner!" Dean shouted eagerly. Many people nodded at this.

"Okay," Shadow conceded with a smile. "How about half-an-hour after dinner next Wednesday? That will give us an extra hour."

There were shouts of agreement at this.

"Good." He took out his map and studied it. "All right. The coast is clear. Leave by groups of two to three, a couple minutes between each other."

Hermione and Draco appeared at his side, staring at the map curiously. They watched with bated breath as the DA trickled out of the Room of Requirement and slowly made their way to their respective dorms. No one intercepted their dots. Everyone had made it without being caught and the three of them relaxed.

xXx

Umbridge returned to her quarters that night flushed with excitement. The wretched twins had just finished their detention. She thrilled in their defiance, knowing in the end they would cower at her feet. Not even getting lost twice on the way back to her rooms and almost breaking her leg on a trick stair dampened her mood.
Living in an ancient, decrepit castle was tedious, but she comforted herself with the thought of convincing the Minister that it needed to be torn down and rebuilt. The fire flared green just as she sat at her kitchen table for her nightly cup of chamomile tea.

"Dolores!"

Umbridge jumped and swiftly crouched her stocky body in front of the hearth. "Minister! To what do I owe this delightful honor?" she simpered, batting her eyelashes.

"Everything is crazy here! We're swamped with letters and panicked demands due to that blasted article! I can't handle your situation as well!" Fudge bellowed.

"What do you mean?" Umbridge asked, eyes wide. "Everything's under control over here. I've made progress as I've reported to you."

"The parents are beginning to howl and there are enough of them that the Wizengamot is beginning to notice," Fudge snarled. "I've managed to put them off for now, but I don't need to deal with that on top of everything else! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Umbridge said ingratiatingly. "I'll turn my attention to the teachers instead of the students. You can trust me, Minister."

"I hope so," Fudge answered gravely and shut the connection.

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Monday, October 12th

Harry Potter: Boy-Who's-Ill

Minister Fudge held a press conference yesterday afternoon in response to the article by Harry Potter published on the 5th, revealing that the Boy-Who-Lived wasn't missing as the Wizarding World was made to believe.

"The boy had gone through a major ordeal and it was decided that for his own safety, we would not reveal the location of where he was being treated," Minister Fudge revealed. "During the third task on June 24th, he was abducted by Death Eaters who wanted revenge for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's demise and was later rescued."

The Minister went on to report that Harry Potter's injuries from that night were extensive and left a traumatic impression on his mind. Minster Fudge claimed that was in part why the Ministry kept the boy's condition a secret; they felt young Potter was owed some time to see if recovery was possible. The incident brings his sanity into question and could possibly create problems for him in the future when looking for career.

"Unfortunately, our Mister Potter escaped from his healers two weeks past," Fudge said sadly. "We can no longer conceal his condition and shield him from the world. The tortures he suffered induced severe dementia and paranoia that still show no signs of abating. Do not take his ravings seriously. He is an ill child. You-Know-Who has not returned!"

The Ministry is sparing no expense looking for our lost, wounded hero. If anyone has information as to his whereabouts, there is a reward for his return to professional care. Minister Fudge also wants to reassure the public that even though the Death Eaters are at large, he has his Aurors on high alert. If they make another move, they will be caught and dealt with severely.
Shadow sneered, flinging the *Daily Prophet* down. "They're not even good liars! They were desperate to find Potter this summer and here they're saying they've had him all along! And he's crazy! How convenient for them."

Rogan snickered while Draco and the rest of the upper years sneered down at the newspaper with a superior curl of their lips.

"I bet Madame Umbridge will make reading the article mandatory," Lillian said in disgust.

"No takers," Blaise drawled with a sniff, making those around him chuckle.

The mood was far less playfully disdainful at the other tables. There were some heated arguments starting up and down the hall about the veracity of the Minister's statements. Shadow smiled when he noticed familiar faces from DA remaining relatively calm. His message that they needed to know defense whether they were fighting the Dark Lord or just Death Eaters seemed to have sunk in. Hopefully, it would spread.

xXx

During that week's DA session they spent almost an hour on Expelliarmus, then they worked on a Stinging Hex. With the right wand movements, you could aim for your opponent's wand-hand, hopefully making them drop the wand or at least throw off their aim. It was a good defensive spell. By the end, everyone was tired and sweaty. Shadow and Hermione were grueling teachers. They expected everyone to learn quickly and work hard.

The remaining forty-five minutes Shadow broke everyone into groups to research a defense related topic using the books provided by the room. During the next meeting, the groups would take turns presenting what they learned and how they thought it would or wouldn't be applicable in a battle.

Unfortunately nothing that the Room of Requirement created could be taken outside of it, so the books had to stay. A few people asked if they could come to the room during the day to further their research. Shadow and Hermione said that would be fine as long as they specifically asked the room to appear only if no one was watching.

Ron's group included Seamus, Lavender, Padma, and Parvati. They were researching disguise charms, but he wasn't paying much attention. He was watching Shadow. The brunet was sitting on a pillow a few feet away. Ginny, Neville, and Dean were sitting with him, but Shadow mostly directed his comments to Neville.

Ron knew that the two had fought together in the caves and almost came close to dying. That was sure to bring two people closer, but this seemed like they were more than just friends. Ron’s blue eyes settled on his sister. Ginny really liked Neville. He had been surprised at first, but over the last few weeks he realized just how serious she was about their relationship. She blew up at anyone who teased Neville even a little, and the way she practically doted on him made her feelings clear to the whole House.

It had made Ron uncomfortable at first; she was his little sister and they had been close growing up. He did like Neville, but they seemed such a strange couple. Ron had gotten over that, though, and accepted that this was who Ginny wanted, so now he worried that they wouldn't work out, instead of worrying that they would. He didn't want Ginny to get hurt.

He looked over at Shadow as the brunet began laughing at something. The Slytherin put his arm
playfully around Neville's shoulders. Neville didn't do anything to move Shadow off. In fact, he looked flushed and happy. Ron's eyes narrowed as he began to frown.

xXx

Neville stepped out of the Potions classroom thinking about the long essay that was assigned, but he stopped when someone grabbed his shoulder. He turned to find Ron. He instantly felt his gut clench. He had wondered how much longer he could go without confronting Ginny's older brothers. They seemed to think Ginny would get over him quickly, but she hadn't, and lately Ron had been watching him very seriously.

"Hey, Nev," the redhead began, smiling nervously. "Got a minute?"

"I guess," Neville answered, shifting his eyes around the quickly emptying corridor. "We have Divination in fifteen minutes..."

"I'll walk with you," Ron offered and slowly they started forward. "The thing is... I was wondering how you felt about my sister."

"Oh." Neville blushed nervously and began to sweat. "I like her a lot, Ron."

"That's good to hear," Ron answered seriously. "She really likes you, you see... So... I was wondering what you're going to do about Shadow."

Neville stopped and turned to look at the redhead. His eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "What about Shadow?"

"Well..." Ron's blues eyes shifted nervously, but then he took a deep breath. "The thing is, I'm sure you noticed, that he... Well, it's obvious that he fancies you. He's a poof. Not that I care, but..."

Ron never got to finish his sentence as Neville leapt at him with a roar of rage. The redhead flew backward as a solid fist slammed into his cheek and another impacted his chest right after. Air whooshed out of his lungs and stars exploded in his vision as a third and forth strike collided with his face. His ears were ringing, so he had no idea what Neville was screaming at him.

"Longbottom! Longbottom, stop!" Eddie Carmichael, Ravenclaw Prefect, yelled. He had been coming down to the dungeons for Potions class with the rest of his class when they came upon the scuffle. He was honestly frightened about the damage the apoplectic Gryffindor could do. "Smith! Help me!"

Together they were able to drag Neville further down the corridor. The Gryffindor's face was scarlet; the pressure Eddie's arm was exerting across his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but odd words sputtered from his mouth.

"Show... him... poof... make... shut up..."

Severus appeared, coming to search for the cause of his class' absence. Ron was just getting to his feet and looked deeply shaken. Blood coated his mouth and chin from his split lip and what looked to be a broken nose. His cheek was already swelling. Neville stood panting, still obviously furious, and was glaring at the redhead from within the two sets of restraining arms.

"Fighting, Longbottom, Weasley?" Severus said in a cold, sneering voice. "Detention both of you tomorrow night. Weasley, report to Mr. Filch after dinner. Longbottom, I'll be waiting for you in my office." His dark eyes swept over both teens, making sure they registered his orders. "Mr. Carmichael, Mr. Smith, release him. The rest of you, to class unless you want detentions as well!"
The teens scrambled for the Potions classroom while Severus waited to make sure the fight wouldn't start again. Neville glared for a moment more before turning and storming away. Ron was still dazed and didn't follow.

Severus sneered. "I recommend the Infirmary, Mr. Weasley."

Ron nodded numbly. "Yeah." He pushed off the wall and slowly made his way up out of the dungeons. Severus could just hear the teen mutter, "What in the name of Merlin was that about?"

The Potions Master wondered the same thing, but luckily Longbottom wasn't his problem. He turned and headed for his classroom.

xXx

Friday night, Remus was feeling tired and ill. Another full moon was in two days, but more than that, it was exhausting pretending to be well for Umbridge. The hot tea steaming in his cup and the half-full pot on the desk in front of him did wonders for his mood though. It seemed like the only time he had to relax was when Sirius replaced him every month. The door opened and Neville froze at the threshold, surprised to see Remus sitting behind Severus's office desk instead of the Potions Master.

The werewolf smiled warmly, his amber eyes warming with genuine affection as he waved the teenager in and gestured to the seat across from him. "Tea?"

Neville smiled as he took the seat. "No, thank you." He looked his teacher over and frowned at his sickly constitution. "Are you okay, sir?"

"Yes. Nothing I haven't faced before," Remus reassured. "I heard about your fight yesterday."

Neville's good mood vanished and a look of hard anger came over his face. "Ron said something he shouldn't have."

"I can believe that," Remus said wryly. "He doesn't usually think before he speaks."

"I know." Neville scowled. "He still shouldn't have said it, but I get that he didn't mean to upset me."

"Still doesn't change the fact that he did," Remus said with a smile. He leaned back in the chair and eyed the Gryffindor. "I've greatly missed talking to you. We've both been busy and I didn't want to make you uncomfortable with the others by singling you out too much for personal chats in my office." Neville flushed and smiled at that. "But if you want to talk about the fight or anything else, I'm here."

"Thank you," Neville said and relaxed a bit. "I've missed talking to you, too. I have a lot to tell you."

Remus stood and brought his chair around so that they could sit next to each other. He listened as Neville described his fall out and eventual confrontation with Ginny. He hugged the teen with fierce affection. "I'm so proud of you, Neville. I know that must have been extremely hard for you. Next time something like that happens, come straight to me. You didn't have to be alone!"

Neville clung to him. With his parents ill all his life, he never really had an adult show affection or pride. Remus was the one to come to him and get him to talk about Lockhart. He was the one to help him through the emotional damage he carried and helped him come to terms with his cutting. Remus was the closest thing to a father he had ever had.

"Shadow helped me."
"How's that going?" Remus questioned, worried.

"Really good actually," Neville said happily. "I've almost mastered the surface level of my magic."

"That's wonderful, Neville! You've really come a long way. I hope you can see that," Remus said firmly, staring into the teen's eyes. "You've worked really hard and overcome a lot."

"It surprises me sometimes," Neville admitted, blushing. "But… I think I do see. I… I've never felt so… free before."

"Oh, Neville." Remus squeezed his shoulder. "I'm happy for you."

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Sirius called as he came barging into the office, a wide grin on his ruddy face. He looked sunburnt and windblown and both looked over at him suspiciously.

"What have you been up to, Paddy?" Remus frowned.

"The wicked never rest," the Animagus said with a wily grin. "Time to go. Portkey will be active in five minutes."

"It's 'no rest for the wicked'," Remus corrected with a laugh and got to his feet.

"Be careful," Neville said worriedly.

"Don't worry about him. He's got a fair maiden who loves to dote on him, he does," Sirius told him.

"Sirius!" Remus reprimanded, blushing hotly.

"Look! There's my proof that I tell no lies!" The man laughingly dodged the werewolf's weak punch.

"Who?" Neville asked curiously, smiling at the two men's antics.

"Why none other than…"

"Sirius, don't!" Remus pleaded.

"… my fair and charming cousin, Nymphadora! Who, incidentally, is several years this old rogue's junior."

"Tonks?" Neville gaped, delighted. "Really?"

Remus buried his face in his hands with a groan. "Don't listen to him. It's not like that."

"Ah-ah, times up!" Sirius tossed him a spoon and Remus disappeared. He turned to Neville and winked. "Mission complete: made the old boy laugh and livened him up."

Neville laughed. "So it wasn't true that they like each other?"

"Oh, it is. Remus just doesn't know it yet. Mark my words…" Sirius paused dramatically and took a flask out of his robe pocket. He downed it in one go and changed into his best friend. He gestured down the length of his new body. "This fine form will be standing at an altar within a few years with little Dora at his side. My cousin's nothing if not persistent. Gets it from her mother," Remus-Sirius said with a wink.

Neville couldn't stop smiling at the thought. Remus deserved a chance at happiness and love. It had been too long denied him as it was. He couldn't wait to write Shadow via their connected parchments.
to tell him everything!

xXx

The next morning everyone was excited about the first Quidditch game of the year. Originally it was scheduled to be Slytherin vs. Gryffindor, but since Umbridge had banned the Gryffindor team it was Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw. There was talk from the Gryffindor table of not going to the game just to make a point, but then they decided that they shouldn't add to the punishment by denying themselves Quidditch completely.

"Are you nervous?" Shadow asked with a grin.

"Of course not. It's Ravenclaw." Draco sniffed and put his nose in the air slightly.

"I don't know, Draco," Shadow drawled with mock concern. "I've heard they've upped their practices and have gotten a lot better. Chang is at the top of her game and the Keeper is tough to get past. Plus the whole school will be cheering for them."

Draco paled a little bit, attesting to his true state of nerves, but his expression never wavered. "Don't worry about a thing, Shadow. We have this in the bag."

Shadow laughed softly and Draco narrowed his eyes, realizing he was being teased. He opened his mouth to say something scathing when Luna stepped up to them. She was wearing a green sweater and a top hat with a large snake curled around it. The snake's head draped over the brim, almost in her eyes.

"I'm supporting Slytherin," she said and excitedly showed them her hat. "Look what it can do!" She reached up and tapped the hat with her wand. It opened its mouth wide and gave an extremely realistic hiss.

"Uh… Thanks, Lovegood," Draco said as his housemate around him erupted into laughter.

"It's good, isn't it?" Luna asked with a smile at everyone laughing with her. "I wanted to have it eating a raven, but I thought that would be inappropriate since I'm still a Ravenclaw. Anyway, good luck!"

Shadow gave Draco a sly smile, barely containing his laughter as Luna walked away. "You have no idea what her hat just said to you, do you?" he whispered.

Draco eyed him, obviously not biting.

"It said: delicious. Think she likes you?"

"Shut up!" Draco growled and shoved his friend almost off the bench.

Shadow howled with laughter, noticing the red tinge to his friend's cheeks. "It's true, I swear!"

Shadow called after the blond as the Seeker left with the rest of the team to get ready. Still laughing, he joined a very excited Miles. Rogan and Lillian handed him badges that flashed green letters saying: Slytherin Rules.

The frosty grass crunched underfoot as they made their way across the lawn to the Quidditch pitch. There was no wind at all and the sky was a uniform pearly white, which meant that visibility would be good without the drawback of direct sunlight in the eyes. Shadow took this all in and felt a deep excitement and longing to be the one flying around on a state-of-the-art broom.
He watched as the two teams lined up and the captains shook hands. Draco stood out from the rest, his white-blond hair glinting in the sun. The whistle sounded and Shadow's whole body tensed with the remembered feel of kicking off and soaring into the open air.

The game was intense. Vince and Greg had little agility, but they could really whack a Bludger and they worked well together since they were best friends. The Keepers were at about the same level, and for the first half-hour, there were no goals made. Ravenclaw had to go to a reserve Chaser when the Slytherin's knocked him out of the sky.

But Shadow's eyes were on Draco and Cho. He watched the two Seekers circle like hungry hawks, their eyes scanning for the Snitch. He was the first to see Draco's body tense and then go into a steep dive. He knew instantly that this wasn't a bluff and so did Cho. The girl rocketed after him, right on his broomtail.

The Snitch skirted the foot of one of the goal hoops and scooted off toward the other side of the stands; its change of direction favored Cho. Draco pulled his broom around and they were neck and neck again, both hands reaching, arms bumping each other, speeding at almost sixty miles per hour.

Feet from the ground, Draco's fingers closed around the tiny, struggling ball - Cho's fingernails scrabbled at the back of the blond's hand hopelessly. Draco pulled up and away and the Slytherin stands erupted in ecstatic screams. Shadow was shocked to find himself standing and screaming, jumping up and down like a First-year.

Clapping, cheering, chanting, the Slytherins poured onto the pitch to congratulate their team. This was the first game in a long time that the game was won so quickly and the only points were those earned by catching the Snitch. The Slytherin players were pounded on and hoisted in the air.

Shadow grinned at Draco and slung his arm around his shoulders. He leaned in close enough to whisper in his ear, "Me and you. We have to sneak out here one night."

Draco grinned back, grey eyes practically sparkling.

The excited shouts and loud cheers slowly tapered off as the Slytherins came upon the front doors. There was a large group of students blocking the way as they watched what was happening in the Entrance Hall.

"You c-can't!" howled Professor Trelawney. "You c-can't sack me! I've b-been here sixteen years! H-Hogwarts is m-my h-home!"

"It was your home," Umbridge answered silkily. Shadow didn't need to see her face to know she was enjoying this. "Until an hour ago when the Minister of Magic signed the order for your dismissal. Now kindly remove yourself from this hall. You are embarrassing us."

"She planned to do this while we were all out at the Pitch, so no one could stop her," Shadow whispered to Draco, but others heard and passed his words throughout the crowd. Unhappy murmurs rose in their wake.

McGonagall finally pushed her way through the crowd and marched up to the two women. She patted the sobbing Trelawney on the shoulder and handed her a handkerchief. "There, there, Sybill… Calm down… You are not going to have to leave Hogwarts…"

"Oh really, Headmistress?" Umbridge asked in a deadly voice, taking a few steps forward. "I have an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister of Magic. I have decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dismissed her."
McGonagall smiled coldly in answer. "You are right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor you have the power to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away from the castle. I am afraid that the power to do that still resides with me, and it is my wish that Sybill continue to live at Hogwarts."

At this, Professor Trelawney gave a wild, little laugh of utter relief.

"Miss Johnson, Mr. Jordan, would you escort Sybill back to her tower please?"

The two Seventh-year Gryffindors scrambled to obey.

"And what," Umbridge said in a whisper that nevertheless carried all around the Entrance Hall, "are you going to do when I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem," McGonagall said stiffly. "You see, I have already found us a new Divination teacher, and he will prefer lodgings on the ground floor."

"What?" Umbridge shrilled dangerously.

"I had a feeling that I should be looking for replacement teachers. Just in case," McGonagall tipped her head in a sarcastic nod. "May I introduce you?"

The crowd gasped as they turned to see a male Centaur come trotting out of the forest. Wide-eyed, the students scrambled to clear a path for him. In the gap, Shadow could see the horrified expression of Umbridge and smiled. The Centaur had silver-white hair and astonishingly large blue eyes. He had a tanned human torso and the palomino body of a horse.

"This is Firenze," McGonagall introduced to everyone. "Centaurs are known for their Divination skills that no human has been able to match. He has graciously agreed to teach here." She turned her eyes to Umbridge. "I think you'll find him suitable."

xXx

Over the next two weeks leading up to Halloween, McGonagall was proven right. Umbridge couldn't find a way to dismiss Firenze though she tried. The best complaint she could come up with was that he wasn't human. Plenty of reason for her, but not quite enough to have other people sign off on him. Centaurs were famous for avoiding humans; the fact that one was coming to teach interested the parents.

The DA had three meetings over this time. Umbridge was so distracted dealing with the staff and faculty that she wasn't paying as close attention to the student body. Hermione also thought of a way they could communicate the date and time of the DA meetings since they rarely knew when they could safely get together in advance. So far it had worked, but it wouldn't much longer as more people were coming. They had five new members so far and expected that number to grow.

Hermione's solution was fake Galleons. "You see the numerals around the edge of the coin? On real Galleons that's just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, the numbers will grow hot when the date changes, so if you're carrying them in a pocket you'll be able to feel them. When Shadow sets the date of the next meeting, he'll change the numbers on his coin, and because I've put a Protean Charm on them, they'll all change to mimic his."

Everyone was really impressed with her, especially since the Protean Charm was N.E.W.T. level spell work.

xXx
As for his next therapy session, Shadow knew better than to skip it again. Severus wasn't going to allow that, and of course Severus went right for the jugular as soon as Shadow stepped in the door.

"Glad you could make it," he drawled and gestured to the chess board. They took their seats; Shadow already braced with gritted teeth. "What exactly compelled you to miss last week?"

Shadow stared at the pieces, avoiding his father's piercing gaze. "I just wanted to think about stuff without having to put it into words for someone else."

"I see." Severus moved a piece and leaned back, his long fingers laced over his stomach. "And what have you concluded from two weeks contemplation?"

Shadow sighed. He didn't want to play chess, and he really didn't want to talk about his feelings. He wanted to hide. From Severus, from himself; he wanted to hide from the world sometimes, but he was already doing that, wasn't he? By being Shadow Snape. How deep undercover did he have to go to get away from himself?

"I don't know what to tell you, Severus," he finally said. "Talking about my problems only goes so far."

The Potions Master considered this. "I agree, but I'd like to hear where you stand now that you've had time to think about it," Severus said gently, moving his knight.

Shadow took a deep breath and leaned his head back on the seat with his eyes closed. Black curls fell messily around his head and the flames of the fire gently illuminated his tired expression.

"You asked me last time if I thought someone could love me, and Neville asked if I thought I could ever love someone else. The answer to both is yes. I know people can love me because at least four people already do. I realize that you don't have to be a part of my messed up life, but you choose to stick by me. So does Neville, and Remus, and Sirius."

Shadow sighed, a tightness grasping his chest as he wondered if he could add Draco's name to that list. "You were right. You can't make people love you," he said, thinking painfully of Aunt Petunia. "And you can't stop them from loving you. I can't really do anything about it. And I know I can love others. I love you and I love Neville…"

Shadow squeezed his eyes tight, tears hidden under the lids. *And I think I'm falling in love with Draco, as impossible and crazy as that is!*

The thought came unbidden and he gasped, so close to losing control. *This* was why he didn't want to talk about this with his father anymore. Severus could never find out! He was sweating with nerves now and rushed the rest of what he was trying to say, just wanting this conversation over with.

"So it's possible that I will want a relationship one day. My dreams have proven that much. I'm just not ready to really consider that right now, even if I did like someone." He held his breath, his strange eyes pinned on his father, seeing how he would react to that declaration.

"I know how hard that was for you to admit, Shadow," Severus said while reaching across the table to grab his son's wrist. "I'm proud of you that you took that first step."

Shadow nodded once, still fighting tears. He wondered how disgusted Severus would be to know how sick he was, that Shadow was beginning to fall in love with another *boy*! Especially after what happened to him, how could he even think it? Why was he so messed up?
But as long as no one knew, as long as there was no chance of acting on it, everything was okay. Shadow already knew he was messed up, so what was another mental sickness on top of everything else? He could live with this. He could ignore it. He had to. He didn't want to lose Draco's friendship and couldn't bear to see his father's disgust.

"All right. We'll leave off therapy every week; instead we'll have it every month," Severus allowed.

"But…" Shadow protested.

"Do you trust me?" Severus asked evenly, his expression intent. "Do you want to get better, stronger?"

Shadow frowned in dismay. "Of course."

"Then we will have a session every month," Severus repeated. He eyed his son and waited for a response. Shadow nodded reluctantly and Severus relaxed. "Good. Now how about we really play some chess?"

"All right," Shadow said with a smile as his father reset the pieces.

xXx

The weekend before Halloween, Shadow and Draco went down to Severus's quarters. Salazar was done making adjustments to Boy's mind after having to start over after the fiasco with Umbridge and the boggart. The alter was now ready for some positive interaction. Salazar coached Draco to try to get the alter talking about anything as long as it was a conversation. The key was to be patient and calm. Draco could never appear angry or violent in Boy's eyes or it would shatter the faint acceptance Boy had formed for another human being, possibly for good.

"So no pressure," Draco drawled, tense and afraid he was going to mess things up.

"You don't have to do this," Shadow repeated for about the tenth time. He was looking off to the side, not meeting anyone's eyes. It was obvious that he was embarrassed.

"I want to," Draco growled and rolled his eyes. "Come on. Let's get this party started."

Severus looked at both boys sternly as if daring them to comment before transforming into his Animagus form.

"You've got to be joking," Shadow breathed wide-eyed, a grin tugging at his lips.

Draco merely stared, mouth agape.

"A bat?" Shadow laughed. "Really?"

The bat screeched at them, mouth open revealing four delicate, pointy fangs. He fluttered up to a bookcase and settled there watchfully. Eventually, the boys pulled themselves together, but they had to avoid looking at the soft, furry creature in order to do so.

Draco sat on the couch and Shadow sat across from him. The brunet took several deep breaths, allowing himself to slowly fall inward until he knew no more. Salazar, working subtly from the inside, gently tugged Boy forward. Draco watched, laughter gone completely, as his friend opened his eyes in confusion that escalated to terror in less than a second.

Boy threw himself from the chair and over toward the wall, his eyes frantically searching for a threat.
Draco remained seated and still, waiting for the child to calm down. When Boy's breathing evened out, he slid his eyes over to the blond, but then flinched away, only for his eyes to slide back. This happened repeatedly, and each time Boy's eyes rested on Draco for a little longer.

"We're safe. No one is here," he said softly when the child was calmer. He kept his eyes just off to the side so that Boy didn't feel exposed, yet still gave him a clear view of the child's expressions.

Boy shuddered. He studied the room for several more minutes before slowly edging closer to Draco and the couch. "Are we waiting for… punishment?" the child asked in a frightened whimper.

"No," Draco shook his head and, following his instincts, he added, "I was alone. I wanted to see you, so I waited for you."

Boy considered this for a second before taking several steps forward and crouching by the end of the couch, a mere four feet from the blond. "Sometimes I get alone, too."

"Really?" Draco asked leadingly, trying to keep Boy engaged in conversation as he had been instructed.

"Yes," Boy admitted shyly. He was curled defensively over his vulnerable stomach. His head was tucked down, covering his throat, and his curls hid his eyes mostly from view. He looked frightened and utterly vulnerable.

Draco stared at the hunched, round shoulders, the shaking hands that were usually so strong and steady, and clenched his teeth together. He wanted to rage at anything, anyone. He wanted to go over and take the child into his arms and promise nothing would hurt him again. He wanted to look away, certain he couldn't handle this. How could he help this broken child without hurting him more?

"I like the dark. I'm safe in the dark, but sometimes… being alone is scary, too," Boy spoke softly, slowly rocking on his heels in a vain attempt to grant himself a comfort he had never known.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked.

Boy flinched, his arms coming up to protect his head as he cried out, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! I'm sorry, so sorry! Please don't hurt me! Please!"

"It's okay!" Draco said quickly, panicked as the child burst into fearful tears. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you."

Boy hiccupped and looked out through his protective arms. His eyes were clear as glass and so much pain lived inside them. "Not mad?"

"No," Draco whispered thickly. He wrapped his arms around his chest; in part to hide their shaking, but also to keep from reaching out to the child. "Not mad."

Boy watched this familiar gesture and sighed softly. He lowered his arms and leaned his head tiredly against the couch, looking up at Draco almost sleepily. "Sometimes I remember and the dark has nothing to keep me from remembering. Then the dark is just another bad place," Boy explained with hitching breaths, silent tears rolling down his grief-stricken face. "Boy is bad and deserves to be punished."

"Oh Merlin," Draco rasped and closed his eyes tight. What the bloody hell do I say to that?

"Yes…" Boy nodded tearfully. "Boy knows. You are Boy like Boy. You know the bad places."
Agree, Salazar whispered in the blond's mind. **Tell him this is a good place and he must have been good to be here with you.**

**That's messed up!** Draco protested.

**Do it!** Salazar commanded.

"I know bad places," Draco said reluctantly. Boy was listening intently while watching him from the corner of his eyes. "But this is a good place. I was good, so I got to wait for you here. You were good, so you got to come."

Tears flooded Boy's eyes and the child put his knuckles in his mouth to suppress his sobs. He keened as he rocked backward and forward. Draco covered his eyes with a shaking hand to hide his own tears at the sound. **Merlin! I think my heart is breaking!**

"Boy finally good?" the child sobbed. There was no joy in the sound, just a soul-deep relief. "I good?"

"Yes. You are good," Draco whispered.

The rest of the hour Boy cried. There was no consoling him. He was that shocked by the concept of being good. Salazar admitted that was as much as the child could take for the day and gently put him to sleep and eased him back In.

Draco collapsed on the couch, deeply shaken as he stared down at his unconscious friend. Severus flew down to the floor and transformed, lifting his son and carrying him to the bedroom. They could have woken him up, but they needed time to recover before facing Shadow. Severus even poured Draco some of his Firewhisky.

"What did they do to him?" Draco asked hoarsely. His throat was sore from suppressing his emotions for so long.

"I do not know for sure," Severus admitted regretfully, staring into the fire. "We were busy facing other issues until now, and there is no one left to ask."

"They deserved what Demon did to them," the blond said fiercely, taking another gulp of his drink.

"I believe you are right." Severus sighed, running a hand through his limp, greasy hair.

"I think it went really well," Salazar interrupted, fading into view. "It will be slow going, but every little bit of progress makes Boy less insane. How about we try to get to positive stimulus next Sunday?"

"If Shadow agrees," Severus said roughly, but he was more uncertain than ever that Boy would ever be able to be integrated back into Shadow without making his son unable to function like a normal human being.

xXx

Halloween was an all day affair in Slytherin House. There was a competition between the upper years to see who could scare one of the younger kids best. There were screams coming from dark corridors, grim reapers appearing to collect souls, vampires, and kids using glamours to make injuries appear on their bodies while lying crumpled at the bottom of stairs.

In the end, Draco, Blaise, and Pansy won. They made the bathroom mirror bleed with the image of a
decaying hag flickering in the mirror's depths, reaching for them. The four second-year girls screamed and fled, leaving one who fainted dead-away. Triumphant, the three fifth-years got to preside over the rest of the Halloween festivities. This included ghost stories, the Halloween Feast, and the making of jack-o-lanterns.

Shadow was swept up into it all. Gryffindor House did some of these things but individually. It wasn't a House celebration. In Slytherin everyone participated. It was like a miniature festival. Clueless about it all, Rogan and the others had to explain to Shadow the reasoning behind everything.

Shadow explained away his ignorance as his father not liking Halloween. This was the one holiday that Severus secluded himself in his quarters and didn't come out unless he had to. Amalia was shopping for Halloween costumes when she and Tabitha were attacked and murdered, so the holiday didn't provide good memories for him.

Jack-o-lanterns, Miles explained, were actually used to ward off evil spirits. Spirits were different from ghosts. They were souls that didn't have enough energy or magic to make themselves true ghosts, but they weren't ready to pass on, either. So they were especially restless and angry when they could affect the material plane, which they could on this one night of the year when the barrier between the spirit realm and the material realm was thinnest. That was why you made the pumpkin face scary. It had to frighten away the evil spirits.

To imbue the pumpkin with its full power, Lillian went on with a grin, it was best to share a kiss with a friend or lover over the pumpkin just as the candle was lit. Shadow laughed at this, certain he was being teased, and turned to ask Draco.

Across the room, the blond Slytherin was leaning over a carved pumpkin his lips pressed to Pansy's. He could see clearly how her eyes fluttered shut and how her hand came to rest on Draco's shoulder. Shadow felt his hands go cold. The heavy food from the Feast condense into a hard, greasy lump in his gut. He tried to tell himself that this was good. This was how it was supposed to be. This was keeping him safe from his own sick desires, but it didn't help. He still felt cold and angry; worse, he felt alone. Really, truly alone.

"Shadow?" Rogan asked carefully. He had no idea what caused that look on his friend's face. He tried to follow the dual-colored eyes, but there were a hundred things in the brunet's line of sight. "I don't want to do pumpkins anymore," Shadow said dully, tearing his eyes away from the blond. "All right." Lillian smiled and quickly spelled them all clean. "It's almost midnight anyway."

"You'll like this part," Miles promised. He took Shadow's wrist and led him over to the fireplace where tall white candles were waiting in a pile. "Tonight is the night we remember those who have passed on. Take a candle. Stand and send thoughts to whomever you wish and light the candle. The magic will make it float with the pumpkins and they will stay lit all tonight and all of November first, which is All Saint's Day."

Shadow took one and slowly the other House members came to collect their own single white candles. He closed his eyes and with great effort cleared his mind of the chaos always hidden in its depths.

He remembered Amalia; her bright laugh, her playfulness, and her loving nature. The quiet talks, the arguments over who won, and her playing piano for her family. Amalia; that bright witch whom he wished with a deep, painful ache that he'd had a chance to meet, a chance to call Mom.
He remembered the adorable, helpless baby, Tabitha. What would it have been like to have a little sister? So adorable and small, a little witch who would grow up as his friend to play with and a pest to annoy him.

He thought of the pictures he had seen of Lily and James. They had loved him; they had died trying to protect their young son. He didn't know them, but he knew he owed his life to them. As hard as his life had turned out to be, he was thankful for it. Thankful he had a chance to meet Severus, befriend Neville, and know Draco.

He was unaware of the silent tears running down his cheeks, but he knew it was Draco when a hand slipped into his. Shadow squeezed the warm hand in his own, thinking painfully of the person that he could have been had he not been attacked that night, or abused by the Dursleys, or broken by the world. Holding the images of everyone he grieved for, he whispered the spell to ignite his single flame.

Shadow opened his eyes and watched his candle rise up among the others floating above their heads. There among the scary-faced pumpkins that guarded the white forest of grief, he saw light. Warm and soft light falling down on all their faces, making the shadows dance, gently turning the dark into something beautiful instead of frightening. It was a good tradition, he thought, looking over at Draco who met his gaze solemnly.

Draco had a lot to grieve for, as well. The loss of the father whom he had adored, the death of his way of life, the hopefully temporary loss of his mother, but he was also touched by the light. Draco had discovered who he was. He was fighting for what he believed was right, made real friends in Shadow and Severus, and found true independence while discovering what he was made of.

"Happy Halloween," Draco said quietly.

"Happy Halloween, Serpentine," Shadow answered with a tired smile.

As the night wore on, everyone trickled up to their dorms, but Shadow didn't feel like sleeping and didn't really feel like playing piano, either. Restless, he headed out into the corridors. It was nearing three in the morning and the castle was silent and still, most everyone was passed out from sugar highs and the festivities. It was like he had the whole castle to himself. The silence soothed his nerves.

He was wandering around on the fifth floor when he thought he'd make his way back to the common room. He turned the corner and froze. Two crumpled forms lay motionless halfway down the hallway. He held his wand at the ready, poised for an attack or a trap. As Shadow crept forward, the scent of blood filled his nose. He gasped as he realized the two teens had bright red hair.

Shadow ran forward as he opened his empathy instinctively, looking for life-signs. Pain hit him like a physical force, dashing him to the ground, as everything went black.

xXx

George felt like he was rising through layers of webs as he regained consciousness. The first thing that came back to him was the sense of touch. His back felt extremely sensitive and he was lying on the cold, stone floor. Then came sound as Fred - he would know his twin's voice anywhere - groaned. Blinking, the dark corridor came into focus, pale moonlight flooding in through the windows.

A whimper sounded off to the side and George sat up with a gasp, the sound bringing back memories of a small barred window in Surrey. Shadow was crouching a few feet away, his eyes
glowing faintly like an animal's in the dim light. Waves of magic pulsed from his huddled form and
the smell of terror hung bitterly in the air.

Fred sat up with another groan, arching his aching back, and as George took in the bloodstains he
remembered what had happened. Umbridge had them write lines with a normal quill and normal
parchment. Every week would be a different sentence, something either about their worthlessness or
about honoring the Ministry. They'd get between one hundred and three hundred lines done each
detention depending on the sentence's length.

It was tedious, but they scoffed at the task, amused that she would think it would make any impact
on them whatsoever except to make them annoyed. Tonight was their last detention and they
expected it to be the same as all the ones before. It wasn't. Umbridge cast a Dark Arts spell of some
kind. It transferred their almost eleven hundred lines total onto their backs, the hated words etching
themselves into their skin.

George broke first and began screaming in minutes. Fred lasted longer, going almost seven minutes,
each feeling like a lifetime, before he began to scream. When the blood soaked their robes, Umbridge
took great pleasure in stripping them so she could watch the words write over each other in sloppy
lines across torn skin and bloody muscle.

The pain had been staggering. Even now, thinking about it made George breakout in a cold sweat.
He would have fainted if it weren't for a second spell preventing him from accepting that promise of
relief. It took a good three hours for the spell to finish. Afterward Umbridge gave them blood-
replenishing potions, cleaned their clothes, and bound them to silence.

"Next time I hope you take the Ministry more seriously, boys," she reprimanded gently as she
shooed them out the door.

George was certain they would, but not in the way she meant. Fred looked almost feverish as they
stumbled back toward the Tower. He knew his twin wouldn't rest until they got revenge on the evil
woman. She definitely didn't know what she had done. Their anger and the single healing potion
could only get them so far. They collapsed halfway back to the Tower.

He looked down at himself, trying to evaluate his condition. Blood had soaked through his clothes
again, but it didn't hurt! George reached for Fred as his twin reached for him, and in seconds they
both had their robes and shirts off. They rubbed at the dried blood and uncovered pale, only faintly
scarred skin. The magic emanating from Shadow slowed and eventually faded all together.

George looked at his young friend and felt his heart twist in his chest. The teen was absolutely
terrified. They could see white all around his wide eyes. His rapid breathing and occasional
whimpers filled the hall. The twins looked around at all the blood and the trail they had left behind
them, and looked back at the obviously traumatized teen.

"Hey, it's okay, Shadow. We're better now; you healed us. Thank you," George said gently, moving
forward.

Boy flinched backward and began to scream, cowering under his arms, and curling protectively over
his vulnerable middle.

George jumped back, astonished, while Fred swiftly erected silencing wards around them. It took
several minutes for Boy's frightened screams to taper off into wretched pleas for mercy.

"You try to get him to Snape; I'll clean up our mess," Fred decided, gesturing behind them at the
bloody trail smeared on the floor and walls.
"Any ideas?" George asked helplessly, gesturing to the rocking, sobbing teen.

"He's your stray," Fred said with a worried shrug and hurried off.

George sighed. "Merlin, Shadow. What did they do to you?" He crouched down and gently called to the teen. Boy eventually looked up, shaking and trembling, but listening. "We have to get you home. Do you understand? Everything is fine, but you have to follow me. Okay?" the redhead coaxed gently.

"F-F-Follow," Boy repeated tearfully. He stood after the teen and followed in George's footsteps, sobbing fearfully the whole way. "I'm sorry…" he sputtered, holding himself desperately. "I'm sorry… Don't hurt me… So sorry…"

George closed his eyes and tried to block out the pathetic whimpers. His fists clenched and he felt like he could kill whoever had done this to his friend. Grinding his teeth, they finally arrived at Severus's door and the Gryffindor quickly knocked. Severus practically snarled as he flung the door open. His Slytherins knew better than to disturb him on Halloween!

"Sir!" George said quickly, backing up, but he didn't have to say anything else as Boy's terrified scream and the scent of sour urine filled the air.

Severus used a powerful sleeping spell on the hysterical teen and levitated him inside his quarters and into the bedroom. He returned quickly, demanding answers of the shaken redhead.

"I just found him like this," George heard himself answering his irate professor. The spell Umbridge cast on him was so powerful he couldn't even allude to what happened at the detention.

"Just found him?" Severus sneered, arms crossed. "And where is your other half? I don't ever recall seeing you separated for more than a few moments."

"He went to see if anyone else was wandering around who could have hurt Shadow," George invented.

Severus stared at him for a moment and the redhead thought for sure he was caught in a lie, but then the man said, "I appreciate you bringing my son to me. You may go."

George obeyed, but he was determined to eventually get some answers.

xXx

The next day just so happened to be a very special day. It marked the three month anniversary of when the Weasley brothers had begun the arduous Animagus Revealing Potion back at Grimmauld Place. They had managed to squeeze in time to work on it in-between their studies and the DA, and it was now ready.

Because there were three of them and it was a Sunday - most of the students were doing homework - they went out to a courtyard for more room, just in case one of them became something large. Hermione came with them, as did Remus, Neville, and Severus.

"I can't wait to see!" Hermione cried excitedly as they stepped out into sunshine.

Ron looked nervous, but the twins accepted the goblets of potion with identical grins.

"On the count of three," George taunted their little brother.
"If it kills us, at least we died bravely!" Fred saluted his teachers solemnly.

"You'll do fine, Ron," Remus reassured warmly. "The potion won't hurt you at all, and the change is only temporary."

"It's wonderful, Ron!" Hermione promised, transforming into a mouse quickly and back again. Under Severus's supervision, she had completed the Animagus Transformation that summer. "Go on!"

"Show off," Ron muttered but tipped the cup back as his brothers did.

The three boys dropped the goblets with a clatter as the change began to take place. In seconds, a beautiful russet fox was standing where George had been and a grey/brown coyote, about twice as big as the fox, stood in Fred's place. Both canines sniffed the air and turned their heads in the direction of the bushes where a lynx crouched still and silent. Two pink tongues lolled in silent laughter, but neither moved to reveal the cat since both Ron and Hermione would recognize the lynx as Harry's Animagus form.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione smiled, trying to hold back laughter.

Neville snorted, but kept his attention on the twins; he even bent to scratch George behind a velvety soft ear. The coyote howled, obviously laughing loud and hearty. Ron was a long-legged wasp.

"It is a good form," Remus contradicted the snickering teens. "It's small and good for spying. It also attests to a strong personality."

"Vicious, you mean?" Neville said softly. The fox licked his hand.

Remus frowned at him. "Ten seconds, boys."

Severus remained long enough to make sure there were no lingering effects caused by the potion before returning back inside. Fred and George couldn't wait to see what their forms meant. They were actually quite pleased that they were different yet complementary. Being identical was all right, even great, but sometimes it was good to be individuals, as well. Ron stared at his feet, silent and red in the face.

"It took me a while to come to terms with my form, but honestly, Ron, I love it now," Hermione commiserated. "Sometimes it's good to be small."

"Yeah, I guess," Ron said glumly, staring at his brothers enviously.

"Come on," Hermione said as she tugged on his wrist. "We can go and look up what it means. I bet it's something really good. Like a defender or protector."

Ron let himself be led to the library, too disappointed to really put up a fight.

"Neville, can I talk to you?" Remus asked.

The teen sighed, but he followed his mentor back inside after a last congratulations to the twins. He knew he was going to be scolded for still being angry with Ron. He knew he should let it go, but he just couldn't yet.

"Well, what do you think?" George called.

Fred grinned. "He who lurks in shadows."
Shadow returned to his human form and stepped into the open and clapped them both on the shoulder. "I think it fits you both perfectly."

"Once we get the transformation down…" "…we could go running in the forest like the Marauders did," they said.

"That would be fun." Shadow smiled, truly happy for the two.

"How are you feeling?" George asked carefully, eyeing the teen and seeing no traces whatsoever of the hysteria of the night before.

"Fine," Shadow reassured. "Sorry about that."

"What happened?" George pressed.

"It wasn't just a Halloween prank, was it?" Fred mock-frowned.

"No. And to be honest, I don't know what happened. The last thing I remember is taking a walk. I don't even remember running into you guys," Shadow told them honestly. Boy always stole the moments leading up to him coming Out since they were traumatic in nature. What could have happened to invoke Boy? "Sometimes I just have these blackouts and flashbacks from the graveyard, you know? They're getting better, but…" He shrugged and pinned the twins with his own scrutinizing gaze. "I was kinda hoping you could tell me what happened."

"We just found you like that, mate," Fred answered easily as the spell closed in around him, preventing them from saying or even hinting at what Umbridge had done.

Shadow could sense their tension and even the faint echoes of intense pain with his empathy and frowned. He was beginning to form a picture of last night in his mind and he didn't like it at all. "You had your last detention last night, didn't you?"

The twins were silent, unable to speak or even gesture, and he felt his stomach clench with cold anger. He'd remember all the bitch's wrongs against him and would make sure she paid for each, but there was no point in making it harder on the twins, so he covered his fury with a playful smile.

"Come on. Let's find out what your forms mean." He puckered his lips thoughtfully. "They're both dirty scavengers, aren't they?"

Fred laughed, following Shadow's lead. "Intelligent, dirty scavengers."

"Never forget that," George agreed. Swinging his arm protectively around the younger teen's thin shoulders, they followed a bantering Fred up toward the library.

**Chapter end.**
Remus leaned against his desk as Neville took a seat in the armchair in front of him. The teen looked mutinous. It wasn't an expression he was used to seeing on Neville's face. "All right. I want to know what happened between you and Ron. I tried to stay out of it, but it's not like you to hold a grudge," he explained softly but firmly.

Neville crossed his arms and didn't look like he was going to budge.

"Letting this fester isn't going to help you or Ron any," Remus coaxed. Neville still said nothing. He sighed. "Would you rather talk to someone else? Perhaps Severus or the Headmistress?"

"No," he answered with an annoyed huff. "Why do I have to talk about it?"

"Neville, I think you know why." Remus held the teen's gaze, refusing to back down. "You can either talk to me or I'm going to have to insist you talk to someone else."

"He called Shadow a poof!" Neville cried, jumping to his feet, fists clenched and cheeks red with a mixture of embarrassment and fury.

Taken aback, Remus could only blink for a moment. "Why would Ron do that?"

"I don't know!" Neville flung his arms up in frustration before turning and beginning to pace. "I guess because Shadow and I are closer than Ron can explain since we supposedly just met this summer. And he's probably sensitive because I'm dating Ginny, but still…"

"And that allegation upsets you," Remus said carefully, trying to feel his way through this obviously sensitive subject.

"Of course it does!" The teen swung around and looked furiously at his mentor.

Remus realized Neville was almost his height and was already broader in the shoulders. He could now see how the teen had done such damage in the fight. As Head of Gryffindor he had received a copy of Ron's injuries. It had surprised him, but now it made more sense. "Can I ask why it bothers you?"

"Why do you think?" Neville snapped, clearly agitated. He stomped over to the other side of the room and stared at the painting that hung there. "Shadow would never be that way. Not after… him."

"Not all homosexuals are perverts, Nev," Remus said gently. "There are just as many heterosexual child predators in the world."

"I know that," Neville muttered darkly, still keeping his back to his teacher.

"Being gay is frowned upon because it goes against the duty to procreate and enlarge the magical community, but it isn't uncommon for people to have secret lovers. In fact, I would say the Pureblood's are encouraged to have a gay lover on the side to relieve the stress of an arranged marriage. That way it limit's the chances of producing bastards to the family line. Are you going to be this disgusted when you come across a situation like that?"
"It's not like I would know, since it's suppose to be kept secret." Neville shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. "I don't want to think about it. How can two guys want that?"

Remus turned the teen around and pulled him into a hug. "Oh, Nev, I'm so sorry you were hurt. I wish I could erase what happened to you. But I'm proud of you. You've faced something I can't imagine enduring." He pulled away and met Neville's hurt brown eyes. "But it isn't impossible for two men or two woman to find love with each other. Sex is just the fulfillment of that love, a release of tension and hormones built up between two people. It's a way to confirm the emotional in the physical realm and get closer to the person you're in love with."

"But why can't they just be friends? Why can't they leave sex out of it?" Neville asked weakly.

"Because that's not what they feel. You know that," Remus rebuked lightly. He gently ran his hands through Neville's thick, wavy brown hair, soothing him. "Could you stop kissing Ginny? Holding her? Getting to know her mind, body, and soul? She's not just your friend. You're in love with her."

"She's a girl..." Neville trailed off, knowing he sounded ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. Thinking of a men together made him feel sick.

"So? A girl could have hurt you as much as Lockhart did," Remus said carefully.

"No!" Neville denied. It seemed impossible that a girl would want to hurt a boy like that, let alone be physically capable of doing so.

"It's true. In fact, it's almost common. What do you think love potions do? They take away the man's will, force them to love a girl they wouldn't normally. Until they were illegal, women victimized men in that way a lot. And I know a few cases where women have preyed on young boys. It's an ugly truth, but people are weak when it comes to self-gratification. It is very easy for people to overlook the feelings of others in pursuit of their own pleasure."

Neville didn't know what to say to that. He hadn't really thought about it.

"Is Lockhart the only gay man you know?" Remus asked.

Neville nodded, unable to speak.

"I'm going to tell you something and I hope very much it doesn't change the way you think of this person." Remus met Neville's wide-eyed gaze solemnly. "Sirius has had many relationships with both boys and girls, but he only fell in love with one person and that person was another boy. He would have done anything for him. There was nothing at all unnatural about that love; in fact, if you had ever seen them together, you would have thought they were the most natural thing in the world. Sirius is my best friend and I love him like a brother. I hope very much that you don't think less of him or of me for accepting his sexuality."

Neville was crying now, partly because he was confused.

"Sirius isn't in any way Lockhart," Remus insisted. "Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry. I have to go," the teen muttered before fleeing from the room.

Remus let him leave, hoping he had gotten through to the teen.

xXx

"Do you think finding the twins made Boy worse?" Draco asked later that night. He was sitting on
the couch in Severus's living quarters with the phantom, his best friend, and the professor.

"Let's find out," Salazar drawled and disappeared from sight.

"Are you ready?" Severus asked his son.

Shadow shifted uncomfortably but nodded. He smiled faintly as his father transformed into a bat and flew up to the top of the bookshelf. He still couldn't get over that. Draco shared his grin. Shadow took a deep breath, figuring this was as relaxed as he was going to get, and leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Boy came Out, screaming hysterically, still thinking he was going to be punished for some imagined fault with the twins. It took Draco almost an hour to calm him down and get the child to actually hear what he was saying. "You weren't bad," the blond said for the hundredth time. "You were a good boy. You helped the twins heal. You made them better. That was so good."

The child stared at him, tears and snot and sweat making his face wet. He looked so confused and lost, his hands red from being wrung so much and his face starkly pale with his fear. Draco was exhausted and frustrated, fiercely wishing he could do more than just repeat over and over that Boy was good, that he wasn't going to be punished.

Boy didn't believe him about being good, it was obvious, but by the end of the second hour he understood he wasn't going to be punished and relaxed a bit. The child was exhausted from his fear and tears and within minutes he was asleep. Draco collapsed back into the couch and closed his eyes tightly.

Severus came back after tucking his son in and placed his hand on the teen's shoulder. He squeezed. "You did well," he murmured, dark eyes sharing the strain Draco felt.

"I'm going to bed," the blond answered tiredly.

Severus let him go, thankful that the blond was there, thankful that they still hadn't lost Boy yet.

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**Symbology Of The Soul**

THE BAT : Severus Snape

In China, the Bat is a symbol of good luck and happiness. In ancient Europe, Bats were sometimes nailed to doors to ward off demons and black magic. Conversely, the Bat was sometimes used as a symbol of the Devil. The Maya regarded the bat as a creature of the Underworld and of death, and the Tupinamba believe a Bat will swallow the sun at the ending of the world.

This paradox exists because Bats are associated with both death and rebirth. A person with a Bat Animagus inherently understand that destruction must occur before creation is possible. They know intimately that change is necessary, although it can be painful to let go of the past.

They are people who will constantly be transformed. Every night they emerge from their cocoon-like wing position, invoking the image of a caterpillar emerging from a cocoon as a butterfly. This type of person will go through several transformations into a newborn being in their lifetime; learning to dispose of old ways of life and adopting new ones.

Because of this, Bats often represent fertility. They are sometimes used as ingredients of aphrodisiac Potions. Historically, women placed drops of Bat blood under their pillow, hoping it would bring her
children. Another superstition of long ago was that the Bat had a very heavy brain, forcing it to roost upside down. This may explain why those with a Bat Animagus possess above average intelligence.

The Bat form also indicates a person prone to envy, because envy works in the shadows and does not expose itself to the light of day. Conversely, because the Bat is comfortable in the dark, this type of person has the ability to guide people through the darkness of confusion and help them face their fears. It is sometimes said a person with a Bat Animagus will have the gift of clear hearing and of listening between the lines.

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While the others looked up their Animal symbology, Shadow discretely looked up his father's. It was like looking through a glass to see the man's soul. Death and Rebirth: that really did capture Severus' essence. First a neglected half-blood, then a soldier in a pureblood army of Darkness, then a spy for the Light, and finally he turned on the Light and allied himself with Shadow.

His father was constantly being transformed and it was a cycle that would never end. Severus would continue changing, evolving; Shadow wondered how his father could stand the notion. With his mental condition and the things he suffered, Shadow relied on stability to help him maintain a tenuous balance. That was the only thing that kept him sane. He wouldn't survive if he were destined to have the spirit of a Bat, but his father was strong. Severus would be able to handle that fate and even prosper under it.

He could see the flaws of the Bat's spirit in his father as well. Envy; it had always been able to sink its claws into Severus, especially when he was a child. Shadow could see how his father had grown and leaned more toward the positive side of the Bat spirit and away from envy and destruction. Severus had gained wisdom and risen above his weaknesses.

The book was right on target. Severus was an excellent guide through confusion and an excellent person to help with the facing of fears. And he had definitely inherited the Bat ability of clear hearing. The man was one of the most observant people he knew. Shadow was glad, deeply and desperately glad, that he had his father to help him.

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THE LYNX : Shadow Snape/Harry Potter

Those who have a feline Animagus form all share similar traits. Like other cats, the Lynx is independent, playful, curious, stealthy, and absurdly lucky, possessing "nine lives." They are also a symbol of second-sight, able to see things others can't. Like all felines, the Lynx represents a person who is highly curious and inquisitive, thus often very knowledgeable, but what is unique to those who are Lynx-type people compared to other felines is that they are drawn to secrets.

Darkness symbolizes fears and those things people do not want to see and cannot see, but cats are at home in the dark. To be "lyncean" or "lynx-eyed" is to be sharp-sighted. Those with this Animagus are good at keeping secrets hidden, their own and those of other people. In a strange combination of luck and their keen perception, they tend to uncover the secrets around them naturally, which often make others uncomfortable. This nature is neither deceptive nor deliberately malicious, however. Those with the Lynx Animagus are famous for having no urge to disclose those secrets or use them against others.

They are the masters of secrets; always having their own, but never allowing their secrets to rule their lives. They never forget the truth of things even if they actively allow the truth to be hidden. This makes a Lynx-type person a good person to go to for advice. In addition to knowing when to be
silent, the Lynx also knows when to speak and gives wise council.

They are known for being reserved, cautious, and vigilant. This cat was believed to be as alert as the lion, which sleeps with its eyes open. This degree of vigilance symbolizes the Lynx's unique obsession with liberty. The Romans depicted the goddess of Liberty as having a cat at her feet. A Lynx-type person will act swiftly and viciously to protect themselves and others from any kind of suppression or abuse.

Those with this Animagus are never good to have as an enemy. Cats are known for their stealth and cunning, but Lynx are particularly known for their ability to become invisible. They can adapt to many different types of environments and can blend in so well that they are never seen unless they wish it. Like all cats, the Lynx tends to stalk what it wants and will pounce when least expected.

Lynx-type people, especially, will not drag their wants and desires out in front of other people. They have a greater tendency than the other cat types toward reflection and solitude. They are more territorial than other cat Animagi and tend to have only one or two close friends. They often feel as though they can't ever truly connect with anyone, and many with the Lynx as their Animagus spend periods of their lives as hermits.

Those who have been recorded as Lynx Animagi have reported that this instinct can be overcome by giving into their playful sides more often. The good news is that Lynx people do have an excellent sense of humor and are whimsical, kittenish, and light-hearted at play. They are almost universally fond of music and dance.

Another side to this playfulness is the strong sensuality common to all feline Animagi. It is not surprising that Freya, the Norse goddess of passion and fertility, was associated with cats. The Lynx isn't an exception and is often very confident sexually and takes great comfort from physical touch. Unique to those with Lynx as their Animagus is that they are famous for expressive eyes, able to seduce with a look and able to sway others by their use of eye contact.

Lynx-type people are known to become small business owners, explorers, tour guides, bodyguards, and private investigators. A few have been famous musicians and are usually solo artists, only temporarily - if ever - joining a band.

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Draco smiled sadly as he read the symbology of the Lynx. It was true that his best friend was famous for his good luck and his ability to stumble onto the truth of every mystery. It had always astonished him how Shadow escaped the most desperate situations more victorious than ever before. And the power of his expressive eyes definitely matched the description in the book, but some things weren't the same, and this highlighted the damage left over from the ways Shadow had been hurt.

His friend's instinct to retreat from others was much stronger because of all that had happened to him. He rarely engaged with people he didn't know unless he saw it as absolutely necessary, like organizing the DA to protect himself and eventually get revenge on Umbridge. And even still, that had been Draco's idea.

But the biggest difference was his reservation when it came to physical affection. Draco had noticed it a lot since discovering what Lockhart had done to his friend. Shadow, when he was relaxed and unselfconscious - which was very rare - would often reach out to push him or sling an arm around his shoulders, and when Shadow was happy, he tended to sit so close to him or Neville that they were touching slightly. It showed how ruthlessly that need for physical contact was suppressed the rest of the time.
That knowledge made Draco blindly furious. He couldn't wait to make sure the bastard paid for doing that to Shadow, for making it impossible for Draco to touch or comfort his friend unless he was completely relaxed or after having a breakdown. It was so hard to see Shadow hold himself back, see him deny himself something that would make him happy.

Shutting the book, he forced himself to stop thinking about it. He'd deal with Lockhart later and enjoy it, getting worked up about it now wasn't productive. Taking deep, calming breaths, Draco closed his eyes and, when he opened them again, they returned to their normal light grey instead of dark and stormy.

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THE WASP : Ron Weasley

A person with this Animagus is prone to anger and often has a hot temper. A Wasp Animagus signifies a person who is often underestimated. They are fearless in the face of larger and seemingly deadlier enemies. Wasps live in swarms and working within a group makes them very formidable. Thus this type of person prefers working within a tight-knit community.

Wasps have a very hierarchical society and are very territorial. This indicates a person who will jealously guard their rights and status. Due to this, this type of person can easily fall into envy and hatred, but it also indicates a person with very clear and strict ethics. They will not do what they see as wrong or go against their personal moral code for any reason.

Not much more is known about people with the Wasp as their Animagus form. There have only been a few dozen people recorded with this Animagus since the regulation laws were past in 1783. Hopefully, we will have a clearer understanding of this type of person in the future as more people with this Animagus add to the study.

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"That wasn't so bad," Hermione said supportively, but Ron didn't look any happier about his form. "It's rare to be a wasp Animagus. It says you have very clear ethics; a person with honor. And that you're fearless when it comes to a fight."

"Yeah, and it says I'm a jealous hothead who is always underestimated," Ron scowled.

"Well..." Hermione bit her lip and gently touched his arm. "You do have those qualities, Ron. You can't just ignore that. You have to embrace your spirit, all of it, or you'll never master the transformation. Everyone has negative and positive qualities, Ron. Did you think your spirit animal would only represent the good?"

Ron stood and shut the book a tad roughly. "I'm going to go back to the Tower. See you."

Hermione watched him go with sorrowful eyes. When he was gone, she idly flipped through the book and returned to the page she knew so well, remembering coming to terms with her own form.

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THE MOUSE : Hermione Granger

The Mouse's biggest attribute is scrutiny. Those with this Animagus are famous for their ability to remember information and their ability to pay attention to small details. Those with this Animagus are well known for being know-it-alls and will often "chatter" at anyone who will listen, but the Mouse can also be quiet and stealthy, especially in the pursuit of knowledge.
Believe it or not, many people of this type are prone to stealing and trespassing. The word Mouse is associated with the Sanskrit, "musa," deriving from the root word, "mus" meaning "to steal." Mouse-type people often forget the rights of others to privacy and will sometimes steal things because they believe the item will serve better elsewhere. These tendencies make them good reporters.

Mice possess great courage in facing a world that is so much bigger than they are. They often feel fear but will not allow it to control them for long. A Mouse-type person is too rational to allow that, but sometimes that rationality is a failing, leading the person to disregard all instincts and intuition.

Despite being so knowledgeable, the Mouse is very humble when it comes to skills. They don't mind hard work and are very practical and frugal, believing greatly in efficiency. They are loving and family-oriented, taking great joy in teaching children the things they know. Lastly, this type of person is very independent. They do not allow the views of others to influence their own beliefs and Native Americans see the Mouse as an individual who marches to the sound of a different drummer.

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Hermione remembered being so disappointed that she was such a small animal and the symbology was rife with negative characteristics. She definitely hadn't expected that, but after a few days of reflecting, she agreed the mouse was a perfect representation of her whole spirit, and in coming to accept that, she felt she was able to avoid the faults she was susceptible to. Hopefully, Ron would realize the same. Otherwise, he'd never be able to become an Animagus.

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THE FOX : George Weasley

The Fox was a common symbol for the devil during the Middle Ages. It was often seen as the Tempter. A person with this Animagus therefore has an urge to remind those around them to stay alert and resist temptation, usually by testing them. This may seem unhelpful or even troublesome, but it is done out of a true concern for others.

As a canine, the Fox shares a lot of the same qualities of other dog Animagi, but a Fox-like person will be especially protective of those they perceive as family, just as a mother Fox is notorious for her viciousness in her protection of her young kits. The Fox is an inherently feminine symbol and, therefore, most Fox Animagi are usually women. Similarly, a Fox Animagus indicates a person who will be a good parent. They are also a person who can think in new ways and see things in a new light, often giving "birth" to new ideas, possessing creativity in abundance.

The Fox is also known for its physical characteristics and its intelligence. "Crazy like a fox" is a common phrase referring back to the ability of seeing things in a new light, but a Fox-like person will take it further and apply that unique understanding in practical and hitherto unthought-of of ways. A person with this Animagus will have quick mental and physical responses to problems.

Foxes also are known for their ability to blend in with their surroundings. This type of person will be excellent at all kinds of camouflage, both physically and also mentally, keeping their own thoughts and intentions private in such a way that most other people don't even notice they are doing so. Because of this it is very hard to really get to know a person with this Animagus.

In Potions, fox hair is used to make the Elixir of Life, due possibly to its vibrancy and feminine aspects; therefore it isn't surprising that people with this Animagus often live long lives.

THE COYOTE : Fred Weasley
Coyote is said to trick the learner into lessons, giving one the notion that things are not as they seem until the lesson is done and the wisdom gained. In moving from one disaster to the next, Coyote tricks others into moving through spiritual quests in such a way that lessons learned from his antics cannot be ignored. Coyote-like people are famous for being able to point out the petty foibles of people they meet.

In spirit of this, those with Coyote as their Animagus form are hard to pin down. They often contradict each other. Some are prone to drinking and eating too much; many become singers; a few are seducers or whores; they are infamous for becoming thieves and outlaws. On the other hand, some have also been known to be the best teachers, explorers, and guides to spiritual enlightenment. Despite the discrepancies between people with this Animagus form, there are a few common things they share.

Coyote-like people are cunning and adaptable, inquisitive and mobile, and trickery is in their nature. People with this Animagus never give up. Coyotes are survivors, able to co-exist with almost everyone. They are also a type of person that will say "yes" to anything. Universally, they never take themselves too seriously. It has been said that humor is a great medicine. If we can learn to laugh at ourselves, then we have indeed been blessed with understanding.

The twins were shocked at how accurate their Animagus forms described them in relation to the world and each other. Not a lot of people realized there was a constant interchange going on between them. Fred was the one who had an obsession with pranks, but on his own he would prank just for the humor of it. It was George who guided those pranks with his need to teach others a more personal and immediate lesson, and it was his ability to look at things in a new light that generated their most original ideas.

They balanced each other perfectly. Fred was the driving motivation, the one with the wicked sense of humor; George gave them purpose and creativity. Fred was the one who enjoyed the limelight. He was the flamboyant one and kept George from retreating into himself too much. On the other hand, it was George who tamed his brother's wildness just enough to prevent him from falling into the excesses that he was susceptible too, like drinking or law-breaking. George kept Fred from getting too carried away.

It also shed a revealing light on their attachment to Shadow. Before they met the brunet, they had never really known anyone who was a victim of domestic violence. Seeing the bars on Shadow's bedroom window, hearing his whimpers and cries, the fading bruises, his shifty attitude at school - it made George's protective instinct blaze. The book would call it his maternal instinct, like a mother fox with her kits. Fred followed George's lead and before they knew it Shadow was under their protection, closer to them than their own siblings because Shadow needed them, needed their protection, in a way that their biological siblings didn't.

"How's it feel to learn you're girly?" Fred grinned.

"I take it as a complement. Girls tend to be more level-headed."

Fred laughed. "Maybe I should tell Alicia that her boyfriend may be secretly playing for the other team."

"That would only cause Angelina to question you. We are twins, after all." George smiled, serene. He was secure in his own sexuality and didn't feel threatened by his brother's jokes. He was definitely straight, just like his twin. They got enough male attention from each other. They didn't need more of it in the bedroom.
"Good point," Fred agreed. They shut the book and left the library. They had learned all they needed to know and were comfortable with what they had discovered.

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The following two weeks after Halloween were hectic to say the least. Everyone was putting more effort into homework due to the upcoming midterm exams. The teachers were beginning to get stricter as Umbridge breathed down their necks, evaluating their methods and standards. The second Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff was fast approaching, so the pitch was often occupied in the late afternoon and after dinner for practice.

Because everyone was busy, it was impossible to pick a time that everyone could come to the DA meetings, so Shadow decided to have sessions Thursday through Sunday. Everyone could come to the ones that they were specifically interested in or were able to get to. They created numeric codes for what exactly they would be going over and he used the Galleons to tell the DA, that way they could decide if they wanted to come or not.

Only a small group of people were coming to every single session. This core group included Shadow, of course, Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and the twins, except for Fridays when they had detention with Umbridge.

The schedule was packed, especially for Shadow who had his NEWT and OWL level classes to keep up with, running the DA, and also giving up Sunday afternoons for the sessions between Boy and Draco. He barely played his piano very much anymore, but on the plus side, he was so busy he had no time to dwell on his feelings about anything.

The days flew by, and it wasn't until Monday, November 16th, that the routine was disturbed.

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Shadow approached classroom eleven during his free period before lunch. Daphne Greengrass, a fifth year Slytherin who had joined the DA last week, informed him at breakfast that Professor Firenze wanted to talk to him about something. Shadow stared at the door, not sure if he wanted to knock. On one hand, he was curious about the centaur. On the other, the Divination professor wanting to talk to him was never a good sign, but there was nothing he could do unless he wanted a detention, which he really didn't have time for.

He pushed the door open and found himself standing in what looked like a forest clearing. The classroom floor had become mossy and trees were growing out of it; their leafy branches fanned across the ceiling and windows, so that the room was full of shadowy green light. The centaur was in the middle of the forest room, his legs folded elegantly underneath his large body.

"Come in, Shadowed One," Firenze rumbled, his dark eyes seeing far too much.

"You wanted to speak with me, Professor?" Shadow asked respectfully, coming into the room and stopping in front of the horse-man who could still look him in the face despite being seated on the grassy floor.

"My herd has banished me, Chosen One," the centaur said solemnly. "I cannot return save for great exception."

"Uh…" Shadow was beginning to sweat. "I'm sorry. Why did that happen?"

"They see my coming here as a betrayal of our beliefs." Firenze reached out his hands, palm up, and
held them to the sky. "We see the events of the world play out above us. It is a pattern that cannot be altered by mortal hands. And yet… There is a time of divergence in the stars, where two paths can be taken."

Shadow swallowed hard. He nervously brushed hair out of his face and glanced upward. All he saw was the illusion of sunlight shining through dappled leaves.

"Do you know the paths of which I speak?" Firenze asked softly, almost gently.

"I believe I do." The teenager sighed and stopped trying to avoid the moment. "The path that leads to my destruction and the path that leads to the Dark Lord's destruction."

"That is the futures spelled out in the heavens," agreed Firenze. "I left my herd to try and influence which path the world will travel down. Can you sense why I would forsake herd and stars for such a thing?"

"I'm running out of time and I'm headed down the wrong path," Shadow whispered, ice slicing through his veins.

"That is also correct, Chosen." The centaur reached forward and cupped the teenager's pale face in his large, warm hands. "The two paths we walk will diverge very soon and the future will no longer be a choice. It will be written in the stars and there is no denying the stars. So far, the path of destruction is brighter, but time still allows for a shifting back to the path of a better future."

"Why are you telling me this?" Shadow asked, staring into the brown horse-like eyes set into a human face.

"I was banished because I believed it my duty to help choose the path that will be taken. It goes against many of my beliefs because it is dangerously close to Guiding you, Chosen One, but I do not wish my children's children and their children's children to live in Dark Times. Guiding causes strife instead of harmony, but in this case, in these stars, there is choice, no set pattern yet. So I am not Guiding. I am Choosing. My herd does not fully understand that."

"I don't understand, either," Shadow admitted.

"You do not have to." Firenze smiled. "I saw darkness and suffering written above your head in the forest years ago, Chosen. It is a powerful force, yet you tame it. Only one with a bright star would be able to do this; only light can tame darkness. Your star is so much brighter than a normal man or wizard. It rises like the sun and will shine in the sky for eternity with the Great Beings, no matter your path or your end. That is how special your star is. I come to help that star keep a long path through the night sky; that is why I come."

Shadow didn't really understand, but he was definitely feeling uncomfortable by this point. Not only with the cryptic praise and warning, but with being held so close. He could feel the centaur's breath on his face. It was warm and spicy, not like anything human. "What exactly did you come here to do?" he asked, hoping to end the very strange encounter.

"I came to tell you this and to do one other thing that I may not mention yet. As I said, I still hold to my beliefs and do not approve of Guiding."

Behind them, the classroom door opened. Shadow was still held in place by the centaur and could not turn to see who it was. He opened his Empath ability instinctively. A wave of protectiveness and jealousy filled his senses, but what really caught his attention were the undercurrents. It was the same deep feeling that Neville often felt when speaking of Ginny or when Severus remembered Amalia.
Thinking another centaur had entered, he yanked away and turned, expecting to be mauled by Firenze's mate.

"Lunch is in a few minutes," Draco drawled, eyes pinned on the centaur, the spiked feeling of jealousy and protectiveness lashing around him.

Shadow could hardly think let alone stammer out a response.

"I have work to grade," Firenze murmured in his deep voice. He stood and soundlessly walked further into the forest where his office stood. The door shut behind him, leaving Shadow to face Draco alone.

The blond turned his attention back to his friend. The jealousy simmered down, leaving the warm steel feeling of protectiveness and gentle waves of concern. "Are you okay, Shadow?" Draco frowned, noticing his friend's pale face. "Did he do something to you?"

It felt like being slowly wrapped in layers of warm flower petals, Shadow decided, his thoughts becoming a bit hysterical. That warm… affection - He couldn't bear to call it anything else! - that he sensed in others, that he had studied at Severus's demand - when directed at you, it felt like giant flower petals. Pliable and silky soft, like a huge tent falling down around you - inescapable.

"You're hyperventilating," Draco said worriedly as he hurried forward and gently took Shadow's arm. "Come on; let's get you out of here. Then you can tell me what's going on."

Shadow was shaking his head, his eyes frantically wide. No. This can't be happening. I was okay as long as it was just me. Now it's him, too, and he's worried about me. This is messed up! It's wrong! It feels too good! He grasped his school robe above the ache in his chest and struggled to catch his breath.

"What are you saying?" Draco demanded sharply, terrified his friend was slipping into Boy.

Shadow gasped. He had been talking out loud! How much had Draco heard? "N-Nothing," he stammered and yanked away from his friend.

They stood in the corridor now. It was still empty; everyone was still in class. He was shaking. He couldn't stop it. His empathy was still wide open and he didn't have the control to pull it closed.

Draco was looking at him, his eyes narrowed in thought, and then they shot open, excitement and enlightenment zinging through him.

"No! No, I can't do this!" Shadow cried desperately.

"Shadow," Draco whispered. His eyes were blazing now, but his voice trembled. "What did you mean 'as long as it's just you'? Tell me."

But he couldn't. He couldn't say it. It was too horrible! Shadow ran.

Cursing, Draco hesitated, but then he was sprinting after his friend… his crush. It had happened slowly. So slowly Draco never saw it coming until one morning he just knew he was deeply in love and felt like he had always felt that way. Even as Harry Potter, the brunet had been the only one to really engage him; the only one who could invoke such strong feelings in him.

They completed each other in ways Draco couldn't even articulate. They just fit. They worked well together, laughed together. They competed against each other, pushing until they both got better, faster, stronger. They supported each other; Draco was there when Shadow broke down and Shadow was there when Draco had no other shelter. Half of Draco's life would be missing without
Shadow in it. First rival, then closest friend, to comrade-in-arms, and now something much more.

Shadow had touched him, changed him profoundly. Draco had first written to him as challenge to his father. He had been violated and almost broken with the Imperius Curse and he wanted to defy the man who hurt him, so he contacted the enemy, knowing Potter would write back. Their rivalry would demand nothing less, but instead of spitting words, Shadow spoke to him. He measured Draco's words and intent. He measured him and answered wit for wit, challenge for challenge.

Their friendship grew slowly, but steadily and Shadow began to change the world for him. Only little things at first and then bigger things. Everything Draco knew was turned upside down within the space of a few months, and it happened so subtly that he had no chance to stop it.

Suddenly, the Death Eaters he had been taught to revere became a black, threatening entity. The Dark Lord became a deranged, uncontrollable force instead of the heroic leader he was raised to worship. By this last summer, Draco had even been forced to conclude that his pampered existence was not owed him; he needed to deserve it.

Shadow was the window that allowed him to see these things. He distrusted the Light fanatics like Dumbledore and McGonagall. They would never have been able to show him the truth. Only Shadow, standing not for the Light or Dark, but for his own perceptions and beliefs could have shown and taught Draco to do the same. Thinking for oneself was not always an easy concept, especially for a Pureblood Heir like Draco.

For all of Draco’s life, his peers had been assigned to him by his father. They were comrades and acquaintances, but never true friends. He always had limits as to how far he could trust them because betrayal was certain if he showed weakness, if he slipped even a little bit away from upholding the Malfoy standards.

It wasn't like that with Shadow. It never was. To live your life in a type of isolation - even with your parents - and then to be a part of a friendship that involved true intimacy made it that much more significant. It became a precious gift that Draco held close and cherished.

Not only had Shadow taught him to stand on his own and look with clear eyes, but Shadow had trusted him in a way no one else had done. That trust was of such a huge magnitude that it humbled Draco - bonded him to Shadow and Shadow to him in immeasurable ways.

Shadow trusted him with his secrets. He had trusted Draco with his safety, first with Dumbledore and then with Lockhart. He had invited Draco into his home, a home that Shadow protected and cherished passionately. Most remarkably, Shadow let Draco into his zealously guarded and severely scarred heart. That kind of courage and selflessness deserved and answer in kind.

Draco had murdered for this. He had even sacrificed himself to potential death and torture for this. Shadow had marked him in a very real way. Draco wasn't going to let him run away if the brunet felt even slightly the same way.

He was aware that Shadow had been hurt. When you dealt with Boy every week, it was hard to miss! But strangely that vulnerable side, that utterly needy and wounded side of Shadow, made him love the brunet more. He knew they would have to go slow. No, slower than slow. They would have to inch along. Nothing would change at first except possibly their awareness of each other. That was fine. Draco didn't want anything more than to always stand beside Shadow, but he didn't want the
door to slam permanently shut on the possibly of rising higher either. Not when there was a chance, no matter how small, to take that next step.

The bell for the end of class rang and students poured into the corridors, heading toward lunch. It was like trying to swim up a river and Draco had to use all his Seeker skills to keep the fleeing brunet in sight. It helped that he thought he knew where Shadow was going. Sure enough Draco was led along the fifth-floor corridor and into an abandoned bathroom. He just barely managed to swing his book bag into the opening of the Chamber before it swung closed and didn't even pause before flinging himself into the chute.

Shadow ran into the main chamber, past the basilisk, until he came up to the foot of the statue of Slytherin. There was nowhere left to run. Panting, he spun around to see Draco running toward him. "No! Just no!" Shadow screamed in denial. "I mean it, Draco!"

Draco struggled to catch his breath, hair and uniform disheveled, his mind racing so fast he could hardly think. Their future happiness was riding on him handling this correctly. It seemed he was constantly in this position with Shadow; there was never room for error! "I just want to talk. Nothing more, all right?"

"No!" Shadow yelled again, slashing his trembling hand out in a very firm gesture. "No!"

"Stop saying that," Draco snapped, annoyed. "You haven't even heard me out yet."

"I don't have to." Shadow laughed hysterically, frantically running his hands through his hair and trying to keep breathing deeply. "I said no. I'm not having this conversation. Right now nothing's different, but if we have this conversation, then I can't be your friend anymore... I mean it, Draco. Don't say a word. This didn't happen. Nothing happened!"

His eyes were feverish, but there was no denying the determination in them. Shadow meant it. If Draco pushed this, he'd abandon their friendship. Hurt, frustrated, but also desperately afraid to lose what little ground he had with Shadow, Draco nodded tightly. Shadow relaxed, his expression almost painfully relieved, and Draco smiled sadly, his eyes dark and soulful. He would do anything to for Shadow, even deny their future, it seemed.

"Don't!" Shadow snapped, tensing up like a spring. He really didn't want to lose his best friend. He needed Draco. He was a source of support he had become rather dependent on. That was why he was ignoring his own insane desires for so damn long. "DAMN IT, DRACO! I mean it. Nothing changes! Don't look at me like that! Don't sigh, don't do anything! Don't be different or we can't be friends!"

"All right," Draco said calmly, masking his expression. "Okay, Shadow."

Still trembling and gulping for air, Shadow watched the blond's every move, but as the minutes passed and Draco looked as he always did, even felt as he always did - the flower petal emotions suppressed - only then did he begin to relax. To distract himself, he wandered over to the basilisk. Draco followed, talking casually about what they had left to dissect and mentioning how long it had been since they worked on it. Shadow relaxed still further and did his part to forget everything that had happened.

"Shadow? Draco?" Neville stepped into the room, looking around with wide eyes.

"Nev!" Shadow jumped, startled. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you that Sirius has news. He's here to take Remus's place for the full moon," the
Gryffindor explained. He was staring at the basilisk as if it were still alive and would move and eat them at any moment. "I couldn't find you at lunch, so I used my Earth sense…"

His explanation was cut off by an angry shout of his name. The three boys spun to see yet another person march into the supposedly secret Chamber. Ginny was furious. She had been curious when Professor Lupin had whispered something to Neville and her boyfriend made a lame excuse to quickly leave the table. So she followed him. Imagine her shock when he jumped down a chute in Myrtle's bathroom!

"Sirius is here? Shadow isn't supposed to know about Sirius! He could tell Umbridge!" she practically screeched. It wasn't helping to be in this place. It was bringing back horrible memories. She could feel her hands and knees trembling. "And what Earth sense? What is going on? And that thing is disgusting!" she yelled, pointing at the half dissected basilisk carcass.

"G-G-Ginny!" Neville stuttered, shocked and horrified.

"How did you two get down here? You can't open the Chamber!" Shadow demanded, frantic and stalling. How had this happened?

"I… I propped the door open," Draco admitted, but then he quickly shifted someone else into the hot seat. "But that still doesn't explain what you're doing here, Weaselette. Do you make it a habit to go skulking after your boyfriend without him even knowing? You're spying on him!"

"Only when he acts suspiciously!" Ginny countered hotly, crossing her arms and glaring at Neville. "I thought we got over the secrets thing, but obviously I was wrong. Maybe you even made up that story so that I wouldn't come snooping around!"

"Don't you dare!" Shadow roared and only Draco grabbing him by the arm kept him from attacking her.

"Then tell me! How did you get in here? Don't you know what this place is?" Ginny snapped back. "Maybe you are an evil little Slytherin!"

"Ginny! Shadow! Stop!" Neville pleaded. He was violently torn; the ground began to tremble.

"Longbottom! Calm down," Draco yelled warningly, now using two hands to hold Shadow back.

"I'm not evil! You don't know what you're talking about!" Shadow yelled at the pale-faced girl. "I know more than you think!" Ginny shrieked. "I remember You-Know-Who opening this Chamber! I was here!" Suddenly, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in shock, her anger gone as quickly as it came. "I was here. I remember! I remember him using Parseltongue, that's how you get in! But then how…"

Shadow stopped straining against Draco's grip. He covered his face, wiping away the clammy sweat from his eyes and forehead. He could feel the ground trembling harder now. Draco was giving Neville a very pointed look, but Neville was too upset to notice. He was staring back and forth between Shadow and Ginny, obviously really upset.

"Yeah. Okay. Fine," Shadow hissed, disgusted. This was turning into a really, really bad day. "I speak Parseltongue."

"But only…" Ginny was still staring. "No… It couldn't… But now that I think about it… Your friendship with Neville… and, oh bloody hell, your mouth and nose, that messy hair! … HARRY?"
Shadow smiled weakly. "It's a long story, but I really am Shadow Snape now. Got adopted."

Ginny lunged at the brunet. Neville barely caught her. "HOW COULD YOU, YOU BASTARD? We were WORRIED SICK about you! Do you have ANY IDEA what you PUT US THROUGH? And it was ten times WORSE for Hermione and Ron!"

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone, but I had to do it." Shadow stared at her with cold eyes. "You have no idea what's been going on with me. Or what happened to me. I couldn't be Harry Potter anymore; I wouldn't be able to function as Harry Potter. I'm sorry that caused a few people grief and sleepless nights, but that's NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT I HAD TO GO THROUGH! So don't stand there and berate me for doing something when you have NO IDEA WHAT LED TO THAT DECISION. True friends would understand, I should hope."

Ginny just stared at him. It reminded her painfully of Neville, so she took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. "All right. I can see that. I'm sorry, but it was just a bit of a shock. I'm glad you're all right, Harry."

"It's Shadow!" Draco hissed. "Do you want to get him killed? Forget the other name!"

"Shadow… right…" Ginny winced. "Sorry. Look, can we get out of here. This place… I can't take it."

"You can't tell anyone," Shadow warned.

Ginny didn't like it and her expression showed that clearly.

"Please, Ginny," Neville asked softly, reaching for her.

Ginny slapped his hand away and glared at him, still angry with how many secrets he was keeping from her. Geez, you think you know a guy! she thought bitterly. She knew he had hidden depths, but this was getting ridiculous. "Fine, all right, whatever!" She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. "Can we go now? Merlin," she moaned and clutched her head. "I… forgot so much…"

"What do you mean?" Neville asked, wrapping her in his arms and holding her. She was too distressed to fight him.

"He was in my head for months," she said, tears rolling down her face as she looked up into his loving brown eyes. "When Harry rescued me, it was like blank spots in my memory, but… Oh, Merlin… It's not true… It's not! I… I could see sometimes and I could… I could hear his thoughts and… They were horrible!" The girl dissolved into sobs.

Neville practically carried her out of the Chamber. Shadow and Draco followed, silently communicating with looks and minute gestures. They were both thinking along the same lines. If the sixteen year old Tom Riddle had told her things, maybe she could help with the Horcrux search. After all, it was at that age that Tom discovered Horcruxes to begin with. At least she could maybe help them narrow down the list of items to look for.

"Let's go to the Room of Requirement," Shadow suggested to his brother.

"Why?" Neville asked suspiciously, still sheltering his weeping girlfriend. He didn't want them to interrogate her when she was this upset.

"Because she deserves to know why I'm lying to everyone and it's a safe place to talk."

Ginny pulled slightly away from Neville and with great effort was able to suppress her tears. "I want
to hear what you both have to say for yourselves," she said firmly. "Let's go, Nev."

Neville gave in reluctantly.

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The Room formed itself into a small, intimate lounge, producing two couches that were plush and comforting. Ginny grabbed one of the big pillows and hugged it to her stomach protectively. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, but there was still a spark of temper as she stared at Shadow challengingly. Neville sat beside her at a slight angle, while the two Slytherins sat across from them.

Shadow took a deep breath, centering himself. He had had several upsets today. He wasn't even sure he was thinking clearly by this point, but he had to keep moving forward. He took comfort from the solid presence of Draco at his side. The blond was watching them all neutrally, but Shadow knew Draco would spring to his defense if it came down to it.

"I'm sorry my disappearance as Harry caused you all such grief…” he began carefully, feeling his way through the situation. "I certainly didn't want to hurt anyone. To be honest, I didn't know you guys would take it so hard."

"How else did you think we would take it?" Ginny snapped, incredulous.

"Look. Just let me talk, all right?" Shadow demanded. "I knew you'd be upset, but I didn't realize how upset until I got to Grimmauld Place, and by that point, it was too late to go back." Ginny looked ready to say something scathing again and he raised his voice to cut her off. "I have good reason for underestimating everyone's reactions, and I'll tell you if you'll let me."

Ginny nodded stiffly, hugging her pillow tighter to hold her emotions in-check. All she could think about was her brother moping around like a zombie and Hermione crying herself to sleep for nights on end.

Shadow could see the struggle in her eyes. "Do you remember the summer after my Third-year? When I disappeared with Sirius?"

"What about it?"

"I told them where I was and that I was okay. I asked them, as my best friends, to keep it secret from Dumbledore. You probably know that Hermione turned me in." Shadow sighed and rubbed at his eyes, trying to sooth the tension headache building there. "I know she only did what she thought was best for me, but it still hurt. I decided she wouldn't have betrayed me if she understood my reasons, so when I came back last year I explained why I didn't trust Dumbledore."

"What did he do to you?" Ginny asked, leaning forward slightly. She had heard some of the downright questionable things Dumbledore had done that had turned the Order against him post-mortem, but she hadn't been told anything of what Dumbledore had done to anyone she knew personally. Though she did have suspicions that Harry had been some type of victim to the old man's plots.

Shadow opened his strange eyes and held Ginny's gaze solemnly. "I was severely abused at the Dursleys."

Ginny gasped and Neville placed his hand on her leg. She grabbed it and held it tightly. "And Dumbledore knew?"

"Yes. He placed me there. He thought it was worth it because there was a protection on the house to keep me from the Dark Lord." Shadow shook his head. "But it wasn't worth the terror and pain. I
was literally afraid my uncle would beat me to death if I stayed any longer."

Ginny covered her mouth with a shaking hand, but she didn't look away.

"I explained this to Hermione and Ron. Ron believed me, even though I don't think he understood
the full impact the abuse had on me, but Hermione didn't want to believe Dumbledore would do that.
She didn't think I was lying, but she pulled away after that." Shadow smiled sadly. "I don't really
blame her. It's a lot to put on a friend, so I backed off and our friendship became less."

"She knows better now," Ginny said softly. She thought sadly of the girl she had become close to
over the summer. A lot of things were starting to makes sense, like the guilt Hermione displayed and
her ferocity to be on Harry's side.

"Well, I didn't know that," Shadow answered just as softly. "And then the tournament happened.
Ron believed I put my name in the goblet even though I told him I hadn't. We didn't speak for
weeks. It wasn't the same between the three of us after that, even after he apologized. We weren't
exactly close any more. I was closer to Neville. We had been best friends since two years ago. He's
like a brother to me.

"I think I was even closer to Draco than them by the middle of last year. We had been writing each
other, talking about the war and the sides we were born on without our permission. I could talk to
him about things that Ron and Hermione would just brush off as stupid. They still thought in terms of
black and white. There was no middle ground, no room to question, but it was different for me.
There's this prophecy hanging over my head and it's a lot to deal with, especially with the leader of
the Light side as an enemy."

"But they're still your friends, Harry!" she cried tearfully. "They don't feel that way at all anymore.
They've grown up and they really miss you."

"They don't know me, Ginny," Shadow said tiredly, eyes pleading for her to understand. "I haven't
really talked to them since I was thirteen years old; they don't really know what I'm like or what I
think. And more things have happened to me. I was tortured in that graveyard so badly that I can't
even remember it. I'd be insane if I could. Imagine spending almost two hours trapped alone with
Death Eaters desperate to prove their loyalty to their sadistic master and at the mercy of a Dark Lord
freshly resurrected and eager to prove he was still to be feared. You can't imagine how horrific it
was."

"If you can't remember anything, how do you know all that?" she demanded. She understood how
Hermione must have felt when she'd been told of Dumbledore's cruelty. It's not something you want
to believe is real, that such horrible things can happen to you or the ones you care about.

"Severus was there. He came to save me and told me what he saw."

"And I saw it in a memory Lucius showed me," Draco added. There was such a cold dread to his
whispered voice that Ginny shivered, her hand spasming around Neville's, her nails cutting into his
skin. "I still have nightmares."

"It took weeks of constant healing by Remus and Sirius before Shadow even woke up," Neville said
thickly, tears in his eyes. "And almost another week before he could get out of bed for a few hours.
The seizures were because his body was so saturated with healing magic, that it put too much stress
on his nervous system. He spent most of the beginning of summer near death."

"Oh, Harry…” Ginny reached out and put her hand on his knee. "I'm so sorry."
Shadow wrapped his arms around his stomach absently; the talk was irritating Boy and the pressure from inside was making him nauseous. "By the time I was coherent for more than a few hours a day, I had already been missing for weeks. The papers were going mad with fear, demanding I return to protect them. I couldn't handle that, Ginny. I accepted Severus's offer and became his son. He had been helping me for years and was the closest thing I ever had to a dad. And I'm not sorry," he stated defiantly, eyes flashing. "I have a family now. A family that I love and trust. Neville's in that family and you shouldn't be mad at him for keeping my secrets. It was the only thing he could do. You would do the same for your brothers."

"So no one knows any of this?" Ginny asked.

"Actually, I told Fred and George when we got to Grimmauld Place. They stood by me through everything over the years, nothing ever fazes them, and I needed their help."

Ginny laughed. "I'm sure it helped that no one would have believed them if they had told us you were really Harry Potter."

"Also another good reason I could tell them," Shadow agreed with a tired smile.

"But why not tell Hermione and Ron once you saw how upset they were?"

"Well, Ron wasn't sure I was okay. I'm a Snape now and I have these strange eyes." He touched just under his blue one. "I didn't want him to accept me just because I use to be Harry Potter. And Hermione… I don't know. I guess I still didn't trust her. Since we've been working on the DA together, I'm starting to think I could."

"And Ron's accepted you now, so you could tell him, too," Ginny said gently.

"I guess. I've just been so busy with everything and I didn't really want to add another thing to deal with. You see, when we got back to school, a Pensieve was waiting for me. Dumbledore left it, explaining that he thinks the Dark Lord created six Horcruxes. Basically that means he…"

"Split his soul," Ginny finished for him with wide eyes. "I… I remember something… about that."

"You do?" Shadow asked, hope lighting his eyes. "Ginny, anything you can tell me would really, really help. Sirius has been looking, but there are so many things they could be and we're running out of time."

"The… the diary was one… Wasn't it?" she asked in a terrified whisper. "His soul was inside me."

"I destroyed it, Ginny," Shadow promised. He took her hands in his while Neville wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "There's nothing left of that Horcrux. He's not in you anymore. You're clean."

Ginny turned her face into her boyfriend's shoulder and sobbed. Neville stroked her hair and closed his eyes. Shadow backed off as Neville rocked her gently, like a little child, and comforted her with soft words. Shadow's empathetic sense was still raw from earlier and he could feel the love from his brother blazing against his skin - Shadow feared he'd get sunburned - and Neville's overwhelmingly sympathetic sorrow for her filled his throat with a sensation like thick syrup. When you cared that much, people develop their own empathetic ability that was tuned to that one person. Neville practically vibrated with her pain.

Shadow covered his face, as if he could block out the powerful emotions with the thin barrier, and pushed his back into the cushions behind him. He trembled, beginning to hyperventilate.

"Focus on me," Draco urged. He reached over and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, the other
coming up to gently pull Shadow's chin around so the brunet was looking at him. The blue and green eyes were glazed, lost. Draco blinked slowly, feeling calm and centered. Nothing was wrong. They were safe.

Shadow gripped Draco's wrist firmly and felt himself absorb the blond's serenity through the fingers along his jaw and shoulder. Matching his breathing to Draco's - deep and even - he more firmly shut down his empathy. He felt his muscles relax as he mentally leaned into the blond's offered strength. He was so glad they were still friends, so glad nothing had happened earlier.

"Maybe we should talk about this later," Neville suggested worriedly.

"No," Ginny shook her head. She was practically in Neville's lap and was obviously exhausted. "I don't want to have to do this again."

Shadow pulled away from Draco and gave the redhead all his attention. "What do you remember, Ginny?"

"T-Tom was always thinking how great he was. How h-he was invincible and how powerful he was. And he was always thinking about y-you, Harry. He was so mad that he couldn't figure out how you defeated him. He was o-obsessed with it and the idea of finally destroying you to prove that he was truly a Lord of the D-Dark, as he called it."

"Did he think about how he was invincible?" Shadow questioned, hands clenched on the couch, almost holding his breath for her answer.

"I… I got flashes… of him shredding his soul so he'd never d-die." Ginny swallowed hard, looking a little green. "He remembered that he was a soul piece and he remembered the night he was m-made. It was in…" She closed her eyes, trying to remember everything she could. "… an old fashion mansion. He killed his father and broke a piece of his s-soul, putting it in his diary. It would remind him of the horrible childhood he led and his hatred of Muggles…"

"T-Tom really hated him. He read his father's memories and saw that his m-mother had worn a beautiful glamour that taxed her magic and strength. When she found out she was pregnant, she knew she couldn't keep wearing it or she'd k-kill herself and her child. She told her husband she was going to look different, but he promised to l-love her no matter what. She let the glamour go and he was disgusted by her appearance. He l-left her. Tom knew his mother died in childbirth, too weak from poverty and magical exhaustion to survive. He blamed his f-father for his mother's death and for sentencing him to live in the horrible orphanage. He was so glad to kill him."

"But T-Tom killed his father last, I think… Yes, he wanted his father to s-suffer, so he made him watch as he killed his grandparents. He killed his grandfather and put the piece of his s-soul that broke away into a ring that represented his Pureblooded heritage, which was better than their f-filthy bloodline. He got the ring that night; it was new and he wanted to make it his completely. What better way than putting his soul inside?"

Ginny laughed hysterically, tears almost choking her. "I can remember what he felt when he killed them. He loved to dwell on his memories of that night. It was a good memory for him."

"Gin, stop. You don't have to go on," Neville soothed her.

"There's only one thing left," she protested. "He killed his grandmother. Put the piece of his soul that broke off into his familiar. A big snake, a constrictor, I think. Because S-Slytherin was the best of the four Founders, and snakes should be h-honored above all other animals. He got the idea to make Slytherin House royalty almost. He'd find relics of the three other Founders and make them
Horcruxes, too, to show his mastery over them. But not Gryffindor. That House, the House of Dumbledore, would be e-erased. After finding out his future self was destroyed, he hated Gryffindor even more because Harry Potter was in it… That's all I remember."

"Thank you, Ginny," Shadow said warmly. "I know how hard that was, but you've really helped. We might have a chance now."

"Do me a favor?" she asked, peaking out at him from Neville's sheltering shoulder. "Tell them who you are."

"I'll think about it," he promised.

She nodded and looked to her boyfriend. Wiping at her eyes, she frowned. "What about you? What were you saying about Earth sense? And why didn't you tell me about Harry?"

"I couldn't," Neville told her gently. "I wanted to tell you, Gin, but it wasn't my story to tell." He reached out and lovingly hooked a lock of her beautiful hair behind her ear.

She studied his face for a moment before nodding. She could accept that. "What about the Earth thing?" she persisted.

Neville sighed and stared down at his hands clasped in his lap. He looked over at Shadow and his brother nodded supportively. Even Draco looked attentive. He had never had it explained to him in detail what it was Neville could do.

The Gryffindor sighed. "My magic is different from other wizards," he began. "I have Elemental magic. That's why my wand work is always unstable and below average. My true magic is rooted in the Earth. I can sense the soil, the creatures living there. I can commune with plants and help them grow. I have a special teacher who comes once a week to help me with it. There are three levels to Earth magic and I've mastered the first one. One of the things this allows me to do is to sense where people are if they are on the earth or only a little below the surface. That's how I knew to find Shadow in the Chamber. I sensed him down there."

"That's amazing, Neville." She smiled warmly and hugged him tightly around the neck. Neville hugged her back, a joyful smile spreading across his face. He had expected her to be a bit disappointed that his wand magic would always be on the weaker side.

Ginny pulled away and her happy expression dimmed. "I'm proud of you, Nev, but I don't understand why you didn't tell me."

"I… I was afraid," he explained, flushing with shame. "My weak magic has always made the people I care for disappointed. I just didn't want to tell you that I would always be weak until I was better at my Earth magic."

"That's ridiculous." She shook her head with exasperation. "But I love you. Don't keep something like that from me again."

"I won't," Neville promised, hugging her and kissing her cheek.

She smiled at him fondly. "Come on. I'm ready for bed. You can tell me all about being an Elemental wizard and this secret teacher of yours later."

Neville stood with her and smiled at his brother who waved him off. The two quickly left the room, talking quietly, their heads close together as Ginny leaned on his steady strength to help support her. Shadow watched them go, holding tight to his emotions as they tried to fly apart in a dozen different
directions. As soon as the door shut behind them, he settled on the safest: anger. He leapt to his feet and shouted obscenities.

Draco stared at him, shocked. "I thought this was a good thing. We have serious leads on two Horcruxes and what the remaining three might be."

"Goddamn it! I already knew what they were! I just didn't remember that I knew!" Shadow raved, pulling at his hair furiously.

"What are you talking about?" Draco demanded. He put himself in his friend's path and grabbed his shoulders, stopping his frantic movement.

"The Pensieve lessons with Dumbledore all last year! He'd take me to his office, mess with me as Gabriel, and then make Silas listen to his stupid lectures and speculations! My memories are still confused; so many memories with so many different perspectives are hard to consolidate, and I totally forgot about this!"

"What memories? What are you saying?" Draco frowned.

"Dumbledore showed me Morfin's memory of that night. Tom came to him and took the Gaunt family ring and set his uncle up for the three murders. I should have known the ring, at least, was used to make a Horcrux. Tom wouldn't waste such significant deaths. Damn it! We have to go talk to Severus! I can't believe I knew this all along!"

They raced to the dungeons. Severus was not happy with them. They had been missing for almost three hours. They had missed lunch and their afternoon classes, but he quickly calmed down as the two teens excitedly told him what Ginny remembered.

"I recalled the Pensieve sessions," he reassured his agitated son. "Dumbledore told you it was important that you remember the Dark Lord liked to keep trophies. I assumed that was a hint about what he would later show you. Then he concentrated on showing you Merope selling Slytherin's locket and emphasized the Gaunt ring. I put them on the list and Black finally found one, but it is good to confirm that Nagini is a Horcrux."

"What!" the two teens cried together.

Severus smirked, crossing his arms. "That was why we were looking for you. The first place Black went looking for Horcruxes was at Riddle Manor in Little Hangleton. He spent days searching the rundown Manor and found nothing, so he began searching elsewhere, but the place always bothered him. He went back two days ago and searched the Gaunt shack instead. He was surprised to uncover high amounts of Dark Arts residue. There had once been very strong Dark Arts protections around the hovel, but he found nothing inside it."

"You think one of the Horcruxes was there and was recently removed?" Shadow frowned.

"Yes. I think the ring was housed there since that is where he originally obtained it. Lucius took it to resurrect the Dark Lord after the graveyard," Severus answered with a dark little smile. "That means that Horcrux is no longer valid, but with Miss Weasley's information we now know that leaves Nagini, Slytherin's locket, a relic from Ravenclaw, and a relic from Hufflepuff."

"So we're back at the beginning." Shadow sighed and fell heavily on his father's couch.

"Not at all," Severus countered. "We have significantly narrowed our search parameters."

Shadow was in no mood to be optimistic. He felt worn thin, standing at the edge of snapping
completely. "So we're still looking for the needle, but our haystack is just a bit smaller. Oh, good! I feel much better now. Thank you, Severus!"

The Potions Master walked across the thick carpet, his steps practically silent. He stood over his son, his dark eyes roving systematically over the teen's form. Shadow stared back at him through too shiny eyes. His fingers and the muscles in his neck twitched as if he had consumed too much caffeine. He was pale and there was more white around his eyes than Severus liked. On top of all this, his son's curls were looking more disheveled and ragged than normal, obviously having been recently abused.

"Would you like to talk about something?"

"Talk? Yes, of course, Severus! Let's talk. It's not like we haven't done ENOUGH OF THAT FOR A LIFETIME!" Shadow jumped to his feet, eyes wild. "I think the time for talk has long since passed, don't you? We should be doing something! We've been sitting on our asses for weeks and Tom's out there getting stronger! Hell, he could be at full strength again by this point! We're no closer to finding the Horcruxes than we were before! I'm the fucking Chosen One! I should be doing something more productive than playing war games with children and mind games with demented Ministry bitches!"

"Calm down," Severus said gently, deeply concerned. Shadow seemed to be unraveling before his eyes.

"Calm down?" Shadow hissed, practically panting with anger. "I'll calm down when I don't have an insane megalomaniac out to kill me for the evil demon in my head! I'll calm down when we have a better plan than to send Sirius looking all over the godforsaken world for miscellaneous items the Dark Lord may or may not have stored rotting pieces of his fucking soul in!" Flinging his arms around in violent gestures, he stepped up to his father and yelled in his face, "This isn't working! Time's running out, and if I don't do something soon, the world is going to fall into another Dark Age, or so says the fucking centaur!"

Shadow couldn't catch his breath. He saw his father was saying something, but he couldn't hear him past the roaring in his ears. He gasped, desperately trying to draw in air, and everything went black. Severus caught him as he fainted and gently hefted him into his arms.

"This is becoming a habit," he said dryly, carrying the teen to his room.

He returned to the sitting room to summon Poppy and found Draco trying to sneak out, but one sharp look from Severus glued his feet to the floor. The mediwitch arrived and announced Shadow had suffered a panic attack and was showing signs of stress above acceptable standards. He was to rest and try to relax. Severus promised to see to it and the mediwitch left with a shake of her head.

"What, may I ask, happened today?" Severus demanded of Draco. He stood straight and tall, his dark hair casting ominous shadows across his sharp features. He was still in his teaching robes and the all-black attire only made him more intimidating, looking very much like the vampire rumors of earlier that year had painted him as.

Draco swallowed hard, not sure what to say. "I overheard Greengrass talking to Bulstrode about Professor Firenze wanting to speak to Shadow and grew curious, so I went to see for myself. When I got there, the professor was holding Shadow's face and saying something. Shadow was upset. We went down to the Chamber together, but before he told me anything about what Professor Firenze wanted Longbottom showed up. He followed us to tell us Black had news. Weaselette followed him."
"I am surprised that both of you were so careless," Severus hissed coldly. "You'd think that between the two of you, you'd have some sense of discretion!"

Draco kept his face perfectly blank in the face of this insult, even though he felt like doing some yelling himself. He couldn't believe Shadow felt the same way about him, but wouldn't even talk about it! "Shadow decided to reveal his secret when he realized that it could get Weaselette to open up about her memories of the diary."

Severus sighed. Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Considering how thin he is spreading himself this year, it is no wonder that he had a breakdown." He looked at the blond and allowed disappointment to fill his eyes. "You may return to the dorm. Shadow will be staying here for the night. He'll see you at breakfast."

"Yes, sir," Draco answered, quickly letting himself out. Considering his many mistakes of the day, he deserved the reproof. He was the one to leave the Chamber door open and he didn't want to even imagine what Severus would have done if he knew Draco had pushed Shadow about a relationship, especially since Shadow had been sexually abused by a man. Draco was well aware that he was a boy - a blond boy at that! He probably wouldn't have gotten out of there alive.

…

Severus watched the teen flee and sighed. He felt old. It wasn't the first time. He had long since become accustomed to the feel of a weary spirit and a weary body, but this time it seemed more than that. He wasn't worried about just himself anymore. He worried about the future and health of another, and it took a harder toll on him than he expected. He stood silently, watching his son's face while he slept, wondering when he would begin to twitch and twist from a nightmare, wondering what would torment his son this night.

Would Shadow ever find true peace? Even if Shadow destroyed the Dark Lord, he would still have to deal with traumas he had suffered throughout his short life. His psychological problems would still be waiting there, and they would probably be bigger since battling the Dark Lord and fighting in a war was bound to add more.

Shadow whimpered, his pale face crinkling in distress. Severus reached out and gently carded his hand through his son's hair. He hummed, his deep voice smoothing the troubled lines creasing the teen's face. Shadow sighed and unconsciously leaned into his father's touch. Severus couldn't bear to stop after such a reaction. He summoned a chair and sat beside the bed, humming to his child throughout the night.

Chapter end.
A/N: It’s Easier to Run by Linkin Park

Very High and Very Low

After that disastrous Monday, Shadow was more withdrawn than ever before. He still did his homework and ran the DA meetings, but he was distant and pensive. People began to notice and worry.

The twins tried to tease out the source of Shadow's troubled silences, but they only got deflections in return.

Hermione tried asking outright, but Shadow changed the subject.

Ginny kept her distance, still coming to terms with everything she had been told.

Neville offered a listening ear, to which Shadow said, "Later." Neville accepted that for the moment, but he wouldn't let it go forever.

Even Rogan and the others noticed, but they didn't feel like it was their place to pry.

Draco tried subtle questions and got silence, but he watched from a distance, looking for clues. He never expected what he found.

It was late Wednesday night and he couldn't sleep. Feeling restless, he made his way up to Shadow's floor, thinking he'd check to make sure his friend was okay. When he raised his hand to knock, however, he sensed the silencing ward. That meant Shadow was playing piano. He hesitated, but carefully cracked open the door. A slow pounding melody poured over him, set in the deeper notes, and for the first time Draco heard Shadow begin to sing.

"It's easier to run! … Replacing this pain with something numb! … It's so much easier to go…” His voice dropped, deepened. "…then face all this pain here all alone…” Shadow held out the last note, allowing the melody to grow. Then his voice came again but softer this time, more entrancing. "Something has been taken… from deep inside of me… The secret I've kept locked away… no one can ever see…” His voice was sweet, like velvet. "Wounds so deep they never show, they never go away. Like moving pictures in my head… for years and years they've played."

Draco watched enraptured as the piano grew louder, more demanding. Shadow tipped his head back, his eyes closed as he was swept up in emotion. Draco leaned his forehead against the doorjamb, his chest tight with emotion, wanting more than anything to go to Shadow and tell him he didn't have to be alone, but he couldn't move.

"It's easier to run! … Replacing this pain with something numb! … It's so much easier to go… than face all this pain here all alone…” The last word was almost a cry and Shadow went slower again, safer. "Sometimes I remember, the darkness of my past… Bringing back these memories, I wish I didn't have… Sometimes I think of letting go… and never looking back… And never moving forward so… there'd never be a past…”

Shadow’s voice held him prisoner. Draco felt tears burn his eyes as the melody filled the room like the sound of the ocean. Shadow bent his whole body into the song, his head hanging, tears glistening on his cheeks. And as the music slowly built again, Shadow's voice lifted in a hum before soaring, loudly proclaiming his pain to an indifferent world.
"Just washing it aside... all of the helplessness inside!... Pretending I don't feel misplaced!... Is so much simpler than change!..." His voice pierced straight through Draco. "It's easier to run!... Replacing this pain with something numb!... It's so much easier to go... Than face all this pain here all alone!... It's easier to run!"

Draco felt like his heart was breaking as Shadow's voice tightened with tears and broke off, the piano continuing for him. The music became relentless and the captivating melody filled Draco's head. Backing away, he shut the door, cutting off the sound of his friend's pain.

"You aren't fighting again, are you?" Rogan asked, stepping into the corridor. The last bit of pounding piano music had woken him. He was looking at Draco with a frown, stance defensive, and the blond smiled, glad Shadow was being protected.

"No. We're not fighting," he reassured. "I'm going back to my room."

"Good," Rogan said with a firm nod.

"I think it's disgusting," a third voice broke in. Draco turned to see Curtis Warrington, the little brother of the 7th year Slytherin Chaser. They were nephews of Death Eaters and neither had shown any interest in Shadow and Draco's anti-Dark Lord message. "A pureblood like you pandering to that filthy half-blood."

Draco stood tall and regal, his face frozen with disdain. "Last I recall, Warrington, you're blood isn't all that pure yourself. Don't you have a Mudblood grandmother?"

Curtis bared his teeth, trying to look fierce, but the widening of his eyes revealed Draco's taunt had scored. "I'd reconsider if I were you, Malfoy. The traitors are going to be the first to die!" the fourteen-year-old boy hissed threateningly, slamming his door behind him.

Draco's whole demeanor changed subtly, his eyes hardening like mirrors as he looked to Rogan. "Keep your eye on him," he ordered.

Rogan nodded without question, feeling relief as the 5th year passed him and went back downstairs.

xXx

When Shadow's mood didn't get any better by Friday, Neville decided he had waited long enough. He practically ambushed Shadow after lunch and dragged him to an unused classroom. Shadow stared sullenly out a window while Neville sighed and sat next to him.

"Come on. Talk to me," he coaxed. "Are you mad at me because of Ginny?"

Shadow shook his head and met his brother's eyes. "It's just everything, you know? I still have this mess of memories in my head that I generally avoid. It was a shock to hear that I had already had most of the pieces, but that they're all jumbled. I feel like I'm stumbling around in the dark, and we don't really have time for that crap." He got out of his seat and began pacing anxiously. "Tom's not going to stay quiet much longer and I'm not doing anything! On top of that, another person knows I'm Harry Potter, and Firenze says if I don't get my act together, I'll condemn the world to another Dark Age that will last several generations! I don't know how much more I can take. And then there's Draco..."

"What about him?" Neville asked when Shadow hesitated. He stared at his brother's back worriedly. He hadn't realized just how much pressure Shadow was under. He leaned to the side, trying to get a glimpse of his face. "Shadow? Hey, what's wrong?"
"Nothing. Just forget it," he answered tightly, his hands clenched at his sides. He turned around when he felt he could keep the terror from his face. He had come so close to revealing his dirty little secret. He just couldn't believe Draco felt the same! How was that possible? Draco wasn't messed up, wasn't sick, so how could Draco want him? Wasn't it wrong? And even if it wasn't, Draco knew as well as anyone how messed up he was since he dealt with Boy. Why would someone so great like Draco love someone so screwed in the head as Shadow was?

"I'm sure it will work out," Neville said reassuringly. "Draco's a good friend. I was doubtful at first, but he's really proven himself."

"Yeah, I know.” Shadow sighed tiredly and moved forward. He sat on the desk next to his brother. "I just don't know what to do. I feel so helpless."

They sat in thoughtful silence for a few minutes, Neville watching his brother with deep concern.

Neville seemed to have bloomed over these last months. He continued to drop weight and he grew almost half an inch every month. His brown hair was getting longer, turning wavy and falling handsomely over his forehead and around his ears. He was no longer clumsy and his growing self-confidence showed in his mannerisms. Every week he was getting more and more capable with his Earth magic, and the DA was really helping his wand work as much as it could be helped. He and Ginny had their ups and downs, but in general their relationship was getting deeper and stronger.

Shadow, however, wasn't thriving. He looked more worn down and was getting thinner - something Shadow really couldn't afford. He was too pale, and there were circles under his eyes again attesting to more restless nights.

"You need to remember that you're not alone," Neville suddenly said. He met Shadow's gaze and held it. His dark brown eyes were serious and sincere. "You aren't meant to fight this war alone." He held up a hand when Shadow opened his mouth to argue. "I know that you have to fulfill the prophecy, but that was referring to the Dark Lord, not his army, or single-handedly protecting the whole Wizarding population. You aren't responsible for the world, Shadow. I know it feels like that sometimes, but we have to fight for ourselves, too. Or you defeating the Dark Lord would mean nothing. It would be an empty victory."

Shadow blinked. He hadn't really thought about it like that before.

"We have to stand up and fight for what's right. That's the only way we're really going to defeat the Dark," Neville continued. "You have an important part to play. It's like you're the final move, the key stroke, but we have to carry you there, otherwise this will just keep on happening. The Order is working hard and the Ministry Aurors will be behind you once they realize the truth. They won't be able to keep their heads in the sand for much longer. Even us, the kids, are ready and willing to fight. You only have to look at the DA for that."

"So it's not me against the world?" Shadow smiled wryly.

"No. It's not.” Neville smiled back. "It's the Light against the Dark. A whole side of people against another side; it's about what will and won't be accepted by society. A key player or not, you're just one person. This is going to take all of us."

Shadow nodded, ducking his head shyly, his curls hiding his eyes as he smiled. "Thanks, Nev. You're getting better at these pep talks."

Neville laughed. "You're welcome. I'll remind you again whenever you need me to." He reached over and pushed his brother playfully on the arm.
Shadow laughed softly, a weight lifted off his shoulders. "Want to go out to the greenhouses? We could help Professor Sprout get the plants ready for winter."

"Sounds good." Neville grinned and followed his brother outside.

xXx

It wasn't until Saturday that Curtis's threat was revealed to have some truth to it. It was a Hogsmeade weekend and Miles had finally convinced Shadow to come to the village with them.

"Do you want to go to Honeydukes?" Miles asked happily.

Shadow shrugged. "Whatever."

They were all bundled up against the cold. The heavy November clouds looked like they might deliver sleet or hail. The wind was cold enough to numb his fingers and his nose, and he thought fondly of the plush green chair by the fire in the common room.

Everyone was cheerfully going about their shopping and games, excitedly proclaiming over new items bought and gossiping loudly. Couples walked down the cobblestone road, holding hands and sharing warmth, their faces and eyes aglow. Shadow even caught sight of Ginny and Neville through the window of the tea shop. They were talking seriously, but their hands were linked over the table. When Neville got up to get them more tea, he casually kissed her offered cheek, making her smile.

Shadow looked away with a bitter pang of frustration and fear and was glad when Miles tugged him into Honeydukes. The shop was busy as it always was on Hogsmeade weekends. The children and teens were eager to re-supply themselves with candy and treats. Lillian crossed her arms and scowled playfully at her two guy friends. Her fierce expression was softened, however, by her short windblown hair and her rosy cheeks, making Miles and Rogan laugh at her and shove her playfully.

Shadow watched this all from a relatively empty corner. He couldn't take it anymore; all the laughter and loud voices. He waited until his escort was occupied and slipped out of the hot shop. The cold air refreshed him. The weather was getting worse and most everyone was inside to keep warm, so he had the street mostly to himself.

Enjoying the silence, he walked up the street back toward Hogwarts, wrapping his winter scarf more securely around his face and neck. Sleet was beginning to fall from the sky and soon his footsteps were accompanied by crunching sounds as he stepped in the slushy stuff. He was almost out of Hogsmeade entirely when he heard the crunch of someone else approaching. Not really wanting more cheerful conversation, he hunched his shoulders and didn't turn around.

"Shadow," a girl's voice called him. He sighed. There was no hope for it. He turned and saw Katie moving to catch up with him. Another girl was running after, quickly closing the distance.

"Katie! Wait!"

"It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Katie yelled back, but her eyes never left Shadow.

Frowning, Shadow dipped his hand into his pocket, fingering his wand. "Can I help you?"

"I have something for you," the ex-Quidditch captain explained, handing him a small box wrapped in brown paper.

"Katie!" Leanne said worriedly, reaching for it. "You don't know where that came from. Put it down!"
Shadow made no move to take the package as Katie shoved her friend away. "Leave me alone!" She again pushed the box toward Shadow. "Here. Take it."

"Put it on the ground. I'll pick it up," Shadow offered, taking in Katie's glazed and distracted eyes.

"No. No, it's for you. Take it," the girl repeated.

"He wants you to put it on the ground," Leanne pleaded. She grabbed her friend's arm and shook it. "Come on, Katie! Just put it down so he can have it."

"No. I have to give it to him. Right into his hand," Katie argued, stepping forward, pushing the package toward the younger teen.

Leanne made a grab for the box and Katie yelled in rage as the brown paper tore between them. Shadow shouted a warning as he lifted his wand and blasted the package away, but it was too late. Katie's yell rose in pitch as she arched, her body bowed backward with agony. Her eyes rolled back in her head, revealing only white as her face stretched with the ear-shattering scream. Leanne started to scream, too, and grabbed at her friend as Katie lifted into the air with morbid grace.

Shadow ripped his bracelet off his wrist - It was the second one he had used this year! - and helped the hysterical girl try to pull Katie back to the ground. It wasn't working, so he screamed for Leanne to move away and spelled Katie with a bondage spell that should have tied her down. Ropes snapped out and attached themselves to the floating girl but couldn't budge her. Shadow was just about to try something else when Katie collapsed on her own, still writhing and screaming hoarsely.

He had no idea what to do and Leanne was only hurting herself trying to contain her friend’s thrashing. Luckily, he didn't have to think of something else when Katie collapsed on her own, still writhing and screaming hoarsely.

"What happened here?" McGonagall demanded.

"It happened when that package tore!" Leanne shrieked, pointing a shaking finger at the ripped brown paper and opened box.

Shadow crouched down to look more closely. There was a delicate silver chain spilling from the broken container. It was studded with strangely glittering green emeralds and looked sickly.

"Don't touch it!" McGonagall ordered.

"I wasn't going to," Shadow drawled, shaking his head. Did he look stupid? He stood and asked Leanne, "Who gave this to Katie?"

"Well, that's why we were arguing," the girl said, still crying softly. "She came back from the bathroom at the Three Broomsticks holding it. Said it was a surprise for you and she had to deliver it. She looked all funny when she said it though and I cast that curse detection spell... you know..."

Shadow did know. They covered it in the DA last week.

"And it lit up! So I told her to put it down, but she wouldn't. She shoved me and ran off. I had to pay our tab and then I went after her. I bet she's been Imperiused!"

"Shhh," McGonagall soothed, eyeing the students who were beginning to return to the castle. She bent, charmed her scarf with several protections, and carefully lifted the box and the emerald-studded chain within it. "Let's finish this discussion inside where it's warm. Come along, my girl. It'll be fine.
Katie's in the best hands. You know how skilled Madam Pomfrey is."

Shadow followed in their wake, but he wasn't really listening to the Headmistress's reassurances. He was lost in his own thoughts. Katie had obviously been told to get that cursed necklace to him, but it was a clumsy attempt to hurt him, really. Definitely not up to the standards of the Death Eaters or the Dark Lord, even if they were all half-mad. But that begged the question, if it wasn't the Death Eaters, who was behind the assassination attempt?

Leanne couldn't give them much more information than she already had and McGonagall ordered her to the Hospital Wing for a Calming Potion.

"Things are beginning to get bad," she said gravely, staring at him through tired hazel eyes. Her hair was looking more grey than usual and Shadow felt a sudden pang of sympathy. "I promised your father that you would be safe here. I am appalled that you came so close to injury."

"I'm fine," he assured her, hands twisting in his lap uncomfortably. He hated that she looked so exhausted in part because she was worrying about Harry Potter, but he couldn't trust her with the truth. She was the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. She had a whole world she was trying to protect. He could never trust that she wouldn't sacrifice him if it came down to it. So all he said was, "I wouldn't have let it touch me. Honest."

"Still…" McGonagall sighed and rubbed at the bridge of her nose. "Hogsmeade weekends are out of the question now, and I'll have to tighten the wards, maybe arrange for other security measures. It is a shame. I know how much everyone looked forward to the visits to the village to escape some of their professors for a while."

Or just one professor in particular, Shadow thought darkly. "I'm sure we'll manage," he said instead. "Thank you, Headmistress. For protecting my father and me."

"It is my job, Shadow," McGonagall said, smiling.

Shadow went looking for Draco. He found the blond in the common room and quickly pulled him into one of the private sitting rooms. Draco was furious when he heard what happened. He quickly told Shadow about coming up to his room Wednesday night and Curtis Warrington's threat.

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Shadow fumed.

"You've been kind of avoiding me. I thought I could keep and eye out. I was wrong," Draco said through gritted teeth. He lashed out and punched the wall. "Damn! I thought I was actually getting somewhere with Pansy! She played me! Told me the attack wasn't coming until Christmas!"

"Pansy, huh?" Shadow sneered coldly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Draco demanded through narrowed eyes.

"Nothing," Shadow snapped. He moved away from the blond, putting distance between them, and tried to regain his temper. He had no reason to be jealous; there was nothing but friendship between Draco and him. "So the attack was from a student here. Most likely a Slytherin with Death Eater connections who's a Fourth-year or older."

"Yeah," Draco answered, still stung by the Pansy remark. Now that he knew Shadow might like him in a more romantic way, he had refrained from engaging in the physical push and shove that the Slytherins used and practiced to influence each other. He'd never gone farther than kissing with anyone in Slytherin, but the art of seduction was something they all had to learn to grasp.
Flirting and teasing, the seductive talk, the right body language, learning just how far to go and when to hold back with promises of more to come - all this could be a powerful weapon in the game of manipulation, but it was different now. This just confirmed it. Shadow may be denying the shifting sand underneath them, but he was still affected.

Draco wasn't about to give Shadow any excuse to ignore their feelings. He had been keeping his negotiations with the other Death Eater children strictly platonic since Halloween. Shadow may not know that.

"Are you listening to me?" Shadow demanded, slapping his hands down on the table.

"Sorry," Draco muttered. He quickly ran his hands through his white-blond hair, forcing himself to focus and stop thinking about Shadow and him being together. "What were you saying?"

"We can't go after them directly," Shadow repeated, irritated he had to repeat himself. "It'll start a war among the students and will push people even more firmly against us. It'll make the Death Eater supporters pull together to defend themselves because they're outnumbered. It may even force those who are sitting on the fence to jump to their side to protect themselves from the threats of the Death Eater wanna-be's."

"We can't just sit around, either. It'll make us look weak," Draco growled, frustrated. Were they destined to always have their hands tied, unable to strike back at the enemy?

"I agree." Shadow smiled, eyes sparkling. "I have a plan."

"Oh?" Draco leaned forward to meet him. Merlin, he loved Shadow like this. "What plan would that be?"

"Strike at their image," Shadow answered, smug. "We should act casual but serious. Sorry that Katie was hurt, but let it make us stronger. We point out all the flaws in the attempted assassination and point out that the shoddy attempt at my life merely made the Headmistress strengthen security, which will make future plans all but impossible. Also point out that it got our Hogsmeade weekends canceled for the rest of the year, which wasn't a very good move for the benefit of the school in general."

"Perfect!" Draco crowed. "We'll have them turning on each other and so mad about the clumsy attempt, the rest of them will see the Dark Lord's side is really the losing side!"

Shadow matched his gleeful grin. "Let's get to work. We'll need everyone we can get in on this. The twins, Neville and Ginny, Rogan and his crew, Blaise, Luna… If we can guide the school's reaction now, we'll have some major momentum. The worst thing that could happen is for everyone to become afraid and make the wanna-be's think they're powerful."

"Let's go." Draco nodded and they quickly left the room, splitting up and getting to work.

xXx

The next Thursday Shadow came to the DA with renewed passion. There were twenty-one students in attendance and it was as if they were completely different people than who they were seven weeks ago. For example, every single one of them could now cast a perfect Expelliarmus. Striding down the ragged lines, Shadow watched Cho Chang immediately drop and roll to avoid a second spell as her wand went soaring into Marietta Edgecombe's hand.

She actually rolled within Justin Finch-Fletchley's reach and he covered her, shielding from both Marietta and Ernie Macmillan. Seeing an opening, he summoned Cho's wand and tossed it to her.
Then they stepped away from each other for more room to move and continued on in the duel. They were still a bit clumsy, but they were working together and were able to actually defend themselves now.

"Marietta!" he called. "Don't wait to press your advantage. Don't feel bad just because your opponent doesn't have a wand. Next time I want to see her bound or unconscious so she can't attack you again."

The strawberry-blond nodded and held her wand more firmly, her blue eyes shining with determination to do better.

Shadow moved on. He came up behind Neville who was dueling Luna. He looked around and found Ginny dueling with Ron. He was surprised. Usually, his brother paired up with Ginny as much as possible, but he shook it off. He knew they were having problems, but they were working through it. He didn't think he needed to worry.

He smiled as he saw that Neville had erected a strong Tectussitum shield and rooted it into the stone under their feet, freeing him to continue casting offensive spells behind the shield's protection. Very clever. Neville may have weaker than average attack power, but his talent for defense was extraordinary. The ability to root shields in the earth gave him a huge advantage.

Luna wasn't down yet, however. She was a difficult partner to duel because she was so unpredictable and her spell power was surprisingly strong. Neville would have lost the duel within minutes without his shield-rooting ability. She danced and twirled among bright fireworks that blinded Neville and made his aim uncertain.

She had realized that she couldn't touch him directly, but she could still affect him through the environment. Between these distractions, she was casting powerful Blasting curses and Stupefy charms that were weakening Neville's shield more and more with each successful hit. It was just a matter of time before it fell.

"Neville! Try the Tectum Repercutio shield! It'll reflect her spells right back at her," Shadow yelled over the sound of explosions. "Luna! Think three dimensionally. You don't have to stay facing your opponent. The shield is in front of Neville now, but once rooted he can't change the angle. Maneuver to his side and attack from there!"

The progress everyone was making was thrilling. Shadow felt himself grinning a bloodthirsty grin. Unable to contain the adrenaline, he made a beckoning gesture at Draco and the two of them clashed in a vicious duel. Slowly, the DA stopped their own practice to watch, their mouths falling open. The two Slytherins moved like true warriors. Dodging, distracting, feinting, using the watching students as shields, rolling and ducking and flinging carefully calculated spells.

Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner cried out as Draco's Numbing spell struck them and their arms went completely limp. In retaliation, Orlando Moran and Terry Boot threw Blasting curses at the blond. Draco dodged, almost into the path of Shadow's Muting Hex. The two boys cried out, however, when Shadow's Jelly-Legs Jinx hit them in the back.

Then the game was on; the whole of the DA against Shadow, Draco, Neville, and Hermione, who also stepped up to the boys' aid. They were a surprisingly good team together, shouting cues and orders, alternating blocking and attacking. They managed to stay "alive" against the seventeen other DA members for a surprisingly long time.

No one complained about the extra vigorous practice. The attack on Katie brought home the reality of the future they faced. Everyone was more determined than ever to learn how to defend
themselves. And because people were beginning to ask around about how Leanne knew such an
effective curse detector, more people were joining the DA and binding themselves to secrecy.

There was excited chatter as the students filed out of the Room of Requirement. Ginny lingered and
when almost everyone was gone she was finally able to catch Shadow's attention. She gestured that
she wanted to talk to Shadow alone. Reluctant, he finished giving advice to a group of Sixth-year
Hufflepuffs and made his way over to the corner she had secured by glaring at anyone who came too
close.

"I've given it a lot of thought. I've talked to Neville and, even though he insists I shouldn't, I feel it's
the best course of action for everyone involved. If you don't tell Ron and Hermione the truth, I'm
going to."

Shadow's face went blank. She stood there with her chin jutted out and her eyes blazing with
challenge, and it made him want to snarl, but a quieter part of his mind thought maybe she was right.
He hated letting people get too close to him, but Hermione and Ron had invested themselves in his
wellbeing once more as Shadow. That didn't mean he appreciated Ginny's tactics. Instead of trying to
convince him or even sounding him out, she gave him an order.

"Do you have a deadline for this ultimatum of yours?" he asked coldly, crossing his arms over his
chest.

Ginny had the grace to blush and drop her eyes. "Before Christmas break."

Shadow spun on his heel and marched away.

Draco, who was waiting at the door for him, raised an eyebrow at him curiously. Shadow shook his
head hard, sending his curls bouncing. He was too mad to talk about it now. Draco cut is eyes back
toward the girl and Ginny squirmed under the steel-hard gaze. Sneering, he followed his friend from
the room.

xXx

December arrived and with it came snow. Soon the ground was covered in white and the cold was
more pervasive. After speaking with both Draco and Neville - who had been surprisingly pessimistic
about the whole thing - Shadow decided that the best time to talk to Hermione and Ron was the
weekend before winter break. That would allow him to still be available for absolutely necessary
questions, but also give them all space, allowing them to ignore each other if their reaction was bad.

Shadow had to admit, he was kind of looking forward to letting Hermione and Ron know the truth.
There was a small part of him that remembered the adventures they went on, the closeness, the
laughs. They were his childhood friends.

Still, he was really nervous about the confrontation, so he put it out of his mind as much as possible.
He focused on the DA and his school work. Every weekend Draco had a session with Boy, and they
went to the third Quidditch match of the year, the Slytherin-Hufflepuff Quidditch match. Slytherin
won by sixty points, Draco catching the Snitch an hour into the game. Of course it reminded Shadow
of his longing to fly and he decided that there was no time like the present. They agreed to meet
Wednesday at the Pitch half-an-hour past curfew.

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They were soaring. Shadow grinned hard into the wind and dove. The ground rushed toward him,
shrouded in darkness, opening up, trying to swallow him, but he was defiance itself and, whooping
with laughter, he pulled up at the last minute, skimming the snow-covered surface and sending a powdery spraying up in his wake.

Draco chased his friend's broom tail. Adrenaline slammed through his veins, heightening his vision and reflexes until he felt there was no broom. He was alone, streaking through the air, mimicking Shadow's every death-defying move. Snow flew into his face, temporary blinding him, and he shot up, out of the spray, to see Shadow looking back with flashing eyes and giving him a taunting flick of his broom-end.

Heart racing steadily in his chest, Shadow listened to himself pant as he spiraled under the bleachers. He was out of control, his blood was singing with the danger, knowing he had a very good chance of not seeing a pillar in time in the dark and crashing headlong into it, but couldn't remember ever feeling this good; he couldn't stop, wouldn't stop.

The icy air stung his cheeks, freezing the devilish grin onto his features. His mouth opened in a long, drawn out howl of exhilaration as he slid right, left, spun recklessly fast out of the path of oncoming wooden pillars and beams. Draco could hardly hear his best friend's shouts over the whistling of the wind. Gasping, he rolled left, just barely missing a two-foot wide wooden beam, his elbow scraping along the wood. He didn't feel pain, couldn't feel anything over the high burning in his brain.

Shadow's hair whipped around his head as he rocketed out from under the makeshift obstacle course and he soared up into the diamond-studded sky with no intention of ever coming down. Frost crackled on his winter gloves, his shoulders, his hair. The air became thinner, he was at least one thousand feet up, and still going. Draco was right under Shadow, saw him sparkle as if he were slowly becoming a star himself. It was the most amazing thing he had ever seen.

Then they were leaning, Draco costing in Shadow's wake, the brunet's shrieks of joy surrounding him, pulling him forward, making him answer with a cry of his own. They were turning in a spiral. The brooms pointed down now, further… further… and they were gaining speed, the spiral tightening until they could feel the force pushing them to the outside of their brooms. It got stronger, they were going faster, the spiral tightening until they were corkscrewing and the world was spinning… SPINNING…

The white ocean underneath them was all they could see. Draco began to lose sense of direction, his stomach was light, lifting away, his blood was sizzling, and Shadow was laughing, laughing… Draco closed his eyes, following that sound in the darkness, always following… Blind, deaf, dumb; it didn't matter. He would always follow Shadow… into Hell… into infinity…

Shadow shrieked and snapped out of the spiral only ten feet from the ground. He was flung from the broom, but his numb hands were frozen in their death grip. He hung there breathless with laughter and exhilaration, his heart a rapid-fire beating in his chest. Draco whipped by him, snapped out of the dive, but was flung from the broom at nearly thirty miles per hour. Shadow wasn't scared; they had imbued the four-foot layer of snow with cushioning charms.

An explosion of icy white erupted around Draco, encasing him in coldness, dousing his fevered skin. Buried, he lay in the silent embrace, listening to his own panting breaths. Then the sky broke free above him and hands were reaching, pulling him out. He looked up into Shadow's face and was transfixed. He had never… never… seen such simple joy on his friend's face. Shadow's cheeks were red, wind-burned. His eyes were blazing with inherent light that had nothing to do with the nearly full moon. His hair was tousled and his grin could have filled the world with cheer.

Shadow watched as Draco grabbed his hands and stared into his face. He couldn't help laughing at his best friend's awed look. The fall had been awesome! He almost wanted to try it himself, but then Draco was launching himself out of the snow and tackling him. They were rolling and the snow was
everywhere… in their eyes, clothes, mouths, hair. Shadow was pushing and elbowing, gasping and shrieking with laughter as the blond tickled and wrestled with him.

Suddenly, he found himself flipped and Draco was shoving his face into the snow. He came up sputtering, seeing the blond running for his broom. He was in the air within seconds, whooping victory cries. Shadow growled and sprinted, stumbled, barely conscious of the stitch in his side from laughing so hard, then he was in the air and chasing after the blond this time…

Giggling, almost drunk with endorphins, they leaned on each other as they made their way back to the Slytherin dorms. It was just past midnight and the invisibility cloak might have kept them from view, but it would do nothing to muffle their giddy laughter. Shadow was limping, his legs burning with cramps from the strenuous flying and aggressive wrestling. Draco didn't look much better, holding his torso stiffly in honor of his aching back. His elbow was scabbing, still untreated, but it didn't hurt. Nothing could hurt; everything was perfect.

"I can't make it up seven flights of stairs," Shadow gasped, giggling at himself, at the pain in his legs. "Thank god the dungeon is downstairs."

"You can sleep with me." Draco grinned, pulling his friend up the first flight to his bedroom. "Shhh!" he admonished half-heartedly. "You'll wake someone."

"Can't… help… it," Shadow gasped. Tears were beginning to streak down his face as his thighs spasmed, but he was still grinning so much his cheeks hurt.

They stumbled into the room and Draco quickly shut the door behind them. Laughing, the teens fell breathlessly on his bed, their clothes damp with melted snow. Draco hissed as his back twinged, but with help from each other, they managed to tug each other out of their outerwear, leaving the slacks and button-down shirt.

Exhaustion was beginning to crowd in and they couldn't manage the transition into pajamas. Half under the covers, the blond fell onto his back while Shadow flopped onto his stomach, one arm tossed over Draco's and his head resting near his friend's shoulder. They were both smiling as sleep took them.

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"Avada Kedavra!"

A small corner of Shadow's mind realized he was standing in a dark, curtained room that was lit by a single candelabra, but the rest of him was howling with rage and hate guided by a terrifying methodical insanity. It was so strong, so consuming, that he clung to that small rational part of his awareness like driftwood in the middle of wildly violent seas. His wand was aimed, and the last of the green light of the Killing Curse bled away, leaving a middle-aged man sprawled on the ground staring blindly at the ceiling with a terrified expression.

"I will not tolerate failure," he hissed in a cold, high voice. The pale man still kneeling before him visibly trembled. "I hope you do better than Avery, Rookwood."

"Yes, My Lord, yes… I-I used to work in the department after - after all… Bode could never have t-taken it, My Lord… Undoubtedly that is why he fought so h-hard against Malfoy's Imperius Curse."

"Stand up, Rookwood," Shadow hissed, the howling bloodlust burning high, but iron control held it in check even as it was cherished.

The kneeling man almost fell over in his haste to obey. His face was pockmarked; the scars were
thrown into relief by candlelight. He remained a little stooped when standing, as though halfway through a bow. He darted terrified looks up at Shadow's face.

"You have done well to come forward with this information once you heard of the secret task Avery had failed to complete for me. I have wasted months on this fruitless scheme it seems… But no matter… You will begin again. And I have every confidence you will not fail me as Avery did. I shall be even more impatient with you than with Avery," he warned and he could almost taste the man's terror in the air.

"Y-y-yes, My Lord… Of course, My Lord… I'll t-tell you everything I know, My Lord…"

Rookwood babbled, his eyes wide and staring, hypnotized with dread.

"Good. Very good, Rookwood," Shadow crooned, and as the adrenaline and bloodlust faded darkness crowded his vision until he was falling… falling…

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Draco woke with a start from a really good dream. He could still feel Shadow's lips moving hungrily against his. Draco's hands were just sliding over the warm skin of Shadow's chest, their shirts already discarded on the floor… Very annoyed, he tried to figure out what was wrong.

The room was silent and only a faint green glow was coming through the window… Wait. The light was coming from the opposite side of the room, and he was certain his drapes were fully closed. Still fogged with sleep, he rolled over on his side. Shocked completely awake, Draco sat bolt-upright, horror dousing him with cold sweat.

Shadow lay on his back, his eyes open, both of them glowing green - Killing Curse green. His face was unnaturally pale and the shadows in the room were alive, writhing around the teen's face and torso like ink-black heat waves. Draco scrambled backward off the bed with a sharp little cry of fear. Shadow's bloodless lips slowly began to smile, quirking in a mad little grin. Hunger and Rage lived in those green, green eyes.

Heart pounding, Draco scuttled backward, hardly thinking clearly. He was at the door, about to fling it open, when he the realization that Demon wasn't moving sank in. He looked back and, sure enough, Demon lay still as death, staring up at the ceiling almost passively with his blazing eyes. His magic wasn't lashing out wildly and destroying the room. He wasn't screaming or roaring or, heaven forbid, laughing.

Panting and trying to get a hold of himself, Draco thought furiously. He couldn't allow anyone to find Shadow like this, so he couldn't leave the room. But he didn't really think sitting it out was a great idea, either. Demon could leap into destructive action at any moment. He had no idea what was keeping him inert this long.

Still on the verge of panic, Draco held his breath as a blissful sigh rose from Demon's throat and the eerie green eyes slid slowly shut, leaving him in absolute darkness. Shaking, the blond lifted his wand - He was amazed he had it at all! He didn't remember grabbing it when he fled the bed. - and cast a weak Lumos. The incantation didn't wake the seemingly sleeping teen, but the shadows had stopped dancing and vibrating, retreating back to their natural state.

Heart pounding in his chest, Draco took a brave step forward. Bracing himself, he took another, and another, until he was standing beside the bed. "Shadow…” he whispered, hating the tightness of his voice.

The teen's face scrunched and Draco noticed a sheen of sweat on his face. He was about to reach out
Draco flinched, but he quickly recovered when he saw one eye was blue, the other was a bright lime green. Shadow began hyperventilating, choking and gasping, obviously distressed. Draco lost all his reserve and sat next to his friend, wrapping an arm around him. He could feel Shadow was trembling and he held tighter.

"Hey," he said gently, rubbing his back slowly. "Hey, it's okay… It's all right… You're fine… You're safe…"

Shadow fought valiantly to keep from vomiting all over. For a few brief minutes he had been Voldemort! He could still feel the slimy darkness of the monster's magic, his lust for more death and punishment, the cold merciless thoughts… Clenching his eyes shut, he shakily clawed at his hair, whimpering.

"Shadow!" Draco called loudly, frightened. "Stop that! Tell me what happened!"

But Shadow couldn't. He was too freaked out. He was going to pass out soon or puke… one or the other. He couldn't catch his breath, couldn't hold the nausea much longer… The Killing Curse still resonated in his bones… Bile rushed up his throat and he was heaving, crying, shuddering. It was all too much and he fell back into blackness.

Draco was officially panicked now. Shadow had gotten sick and was now limp. Afraid he was choking on his illness, he cast a spell to hopefully clear his airways and was glad to see his friend's thin chest rise and fall. He gently laid Shadow back on the bed, quickly banishing the vomit from the bed and floor, the acidic scent still lingering in the air. He raced from his room. Less than ten minutes later, he was back with Severus in tow.

The Potions Master cast several diagnostic spells that were becoming second nature and was satisfied with the results. That completed, he turned to the pale blond fretting a few feet away. "Now tell me everything."

Draco did. He described waking up and seeing Demon; his voice shook and his hands darted around in agitation. Severus listened feeling dread coil in his gut and ice grip at his heart. This was not good. Not good at all. He turned back to his son and forced calmness on his mind and emotions as he gently spelled him awake.

Shadow woke with a groggy groan, his eyes darting around with obvious confusion. Severus was quick to calm him and assure him that everything was well. Following his father's directions, he took slow deep breaths while staring into the comforting black eyes that met his steadily. They did this for almost five minutes before Shadow felt strong enough to sit up and talk.

"I was in the Dark Lord's mind," he said hoarsely, never looking away from his father, needing that connection. Severus didn't flinch. He stayed strong and his face remained passive and accepting. It kept Shadow grounded. "He cast the Killing Curse and suddenly I was sucked in. He killed Avery. I can still feel it. Before it was resonating in my bones," he whispered, wrapping his arms around his chest.

Severus cast a few spells, but they came up clean. "There is a faint dark magic residue in the room and on your person, but nothing at the level of a Killing Curse," he reassured his son.

Shadow nodded, relief rushing through him. "Avery failed to get the prophecy. He and Lucius were working on a man who works at the Ministry, trying to Imperius him into taking the prophecy and bringing it to them, but Bode fought it. They didn't want to rush, I guess, so they took it slow. They
finally succeeded, but it failed and Tom killed Avery as punishment. Rookwood heard what they were trying to do and came forward."

"He used to work in the Department of Mysteries," Severus murmured unhappily.

"Yeah. Well, he told the Dark Lord that Bode could never touch the prophecy, and Tom gave him the job of getting to it somehow, threatened to torture him instead of just outright killing him like he did to Avery if he failed."

"Why couldn't he kill Lucius, too?" Draco asked bitterly.

"Don't know." Shadow shrugged, feeling cold from the whole experience. He thought of the fun earlier that they had stolen that night and wanted to cry. It already felt like a lifetime ago, some strange wonderful dream. It didn't feel real.

"We expected the Dark Lord to go after the prophecy," Severus murmured. "That isn't a surprise."

"He's strong, Dad," Shadow murmured in despair. "He's not weak anymore. He's really, really strong."

"He still doesn't have the prophecy or you," Severus insisted. He reached out and pulled Shadow into his chest. He was surprised when Shadow folded into him and clung tightly. He closed his eyes, wishing he could give him better answers or make promises that everything would work out. All he could say was, "We aren't down yet, Shadow. All is not lost."

"Don't forget you're a Slytherin," Draco added. He sat on the bed next to his friend and placed his hand on his back. "The world better watch out, remember?"

Shadow peeked out from his father's embrace and smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. So…" He wiped at his face and looked up at Severus. "What's the plan?"

"The Order is guarding the corridor to the department. No outsider will get by easily. Not even the Dark Lord. Bode got past us because he wasn't an outsider. As you realize, he couldn't fetch the prophecy anyway. But now the Dark Lord knows it won't be that easy."

"Why couldn't Bode take it?" Shadow asked curiously.

"Only those whom the prophecy speaks of can touch the orb once it is recorded," Severus admitted reluctantly. He knew the instant he did his son would want to go and destroy it.

"Then why haven't…?" Shadow began furiously, just as predicted.

"The second you step into the Department of Mysteries you will reveal that Shadow Snape is also Harry Potter," Severus answered grimly. "And we MUST keep that secret from the Dark Lord for as long as possible."

Shadow scowled, but he understood his father's reasoning.

"I am, however, working on a way around that. It is not finished yet, but I have great hopes that it will be soon. We must stall the Dark Lord from reaching the prophecy until then."

"Like what?" Shadow asked curiously, but Severus shook his head.

"I don't want to discuss it until it is a success. We cannot afford false hope."

Shadow scowled, crossing his arms. Draco shared his annoyed look, his grey eyes unhappy with
"May I ask why you are in Draco's room?" Severus asked in return, eyes pinned to the two teens.

Shadow flushed. A clawing sense of panic sliced through his stomach.

Draco handled it much better and answered coolly, "We stayed up late studying and happened to fall asleep." Never mind the fact that if he had his way, his very pleasant dream wouldn't be just a dream but a reality. It took all his control to keep such thoughts from his face.

"I see," Severus murmured, accepting the excuse for now. He refrained from mentioning the conspicuous absence of both of their bags and books. After all, he didn't want to discourage the arrangement. He was glad Draco had been there when he was. "Breakfast is in an hour. I recommend you both get a shower and prepare for the day."

"Yes, Father." Shadow sighed, running a hand through his sweaty, limp curls. He was still a mess from flying and he noticed Draco was subtly hiding his wounded elbow. That would definitely be hard to explain.

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For the following three days, Shadow tried hard to act as though nothing had changed, but after his vision of Avery's death, the feeling that they were losing the battle only grew. It didn't help his stress level that he was supposed to tell Ron and Hermione the truth on Sunday. This was the last weekend before winter break, and if he didn't do it then, Ginny would do it for him.

Knowing Shadow would be busy dealing with that, Severus decided to have the therapy session with Boy on Saturday after the morning DA session instead of trying to squeeze it in on Sunday. After Boy's therapy, he insisted that they have a normal session for the remaining time leading up to dinner. Shadow wasn't looking forward to that, either, but he had no choice in the matter.

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This was the seventh session Draco had with Boy, and for the past four, he had been trying to get the child to interact with him more. He had a Wizarding children's toy and had been trying to coax the child into playing with him. At first the problem was that Boy didn't understand the concept of play. He just watched blankly as Draco put the colored balls in the corresponding slots, making small colored fireworks shoot out forming pretty animal pictures.

When Draco finally convinced the skittish child that it was fun, Boy watched with smiles and bright eyes, but he still refused to touch the toy or anything else he didn't have to, for fear of being bad and getting punished. All that changed today. Draco watched with bated breath as the child reached a slightly trembling hand forward and very tentatively took the small blue ball.

"Good choice," Draco praised. They were sitting on the floor between the couches, a good distance away from the warmly crackling fire. Boy avoided going close to the hearth when there was a fire there, certain he would be pushed in or otherwise hurt.

Boy looked up through his curly bangs, nervousness obvious in his features but also a childlike glee. He was crouched, his legs in front of his body defensively, but his arms were reaching around that barrier and he held the blue ball like it was something precious. And it was. It was the second big step - after believing he was capable of being good - that he had taken.

Draco smiled proudly, only the tight control he had over himself prevented him from whooping with
joy. Boy offered a quick, shy smile in return, and the blond gestured with his eyes, knowing any physical movement in Boy's direction would make him flinch and probably cause him to lose the confidence he had managed to find for this little daring act.

"It has to go in the matching hole," he reminded encouragingly.

Boy bit his already chewed and swollen lower lip and stared hard at the innocent toy. Then without warning his hand darted forward and dropped the small ball into the opening. A blue firework sparked out and formed the shape of an animal. Eyes wide at his own daring, Boy looked up at Draco, his lips trembling with tension and his breaths coming quick in little pants of fear and excitement.

"Rabbit!" he whispered.

"A rabbit," Draco repeated, tears burning his eyes as Boy huffed a soft, barely perceptible laugh. The child rocked a bit on his heels, staring at the toy in wonder. "My turn," he said when he realized Boy was too afraid to do it again. He picked up the yellow ball and dropped it inside.

"Lion!" Boy said, louder, actually smiling.

"Very good." Draco grinned back. "You're doing really good."

Tears spilled down Boy's cheeks as he let loose a little cry of amazement.

"Your turn." Draco flicked his eyes to the toy again.

Excited, Boy reached out and slowly took the red ball, again quickly dropping it in. "Bear!" He huffed again, the closest sound to a laugh he knew how to make.

They played like this for over an hour before Boy wore himself out. He curled up in a tight, protective ball and fell asleep while Draco continued to make the firework animals for him. As soon as he was asleep, Severus transformed and spelled him to make sure Shadow would remain unconscious for a while. Draco covered his face and wept. Severus crouched and held him, feeling the same grief-stricken burn in his own chest.

"How could anyone hurt him?" Draco demanded, his face still buried in his professor's shoulder. "He's so..."

"Young and innocent. Sweet," Severus answered for him when words failed the blond.

"Young and innocent. Sweet," Severus answered for him when words failed the blond.

Draco pulled away, his hair mussed and his eyes red-rimmed. He looked old, and it pained Severus to see it. "I wish there was something more we could do for him."

"You are already helping significantly," Severus murmured. He stood and helped Draco to his feet. "It's amazing, the progress you've made so far. Don't underestimate all your influence. I never expected even this much to be possible after this summer." Draco nodded vaguely, still obviously unsatisfied. Severus sighed. "You should get some rest. Shadow will see you at dinner."

Draco cast one more look on his sleeping friend. He had a sudden, almost overwhelming urge to touch him, hold him, run his hands through his hair, kiss him until he made Shadow forget everything except Draco. The need was so great that he could feel his hands start shaking. He took a little step forward, but from the corner of his eyes he saw his professor's dark form. With a gasp, he remembered where he was, that he and Shadow hadn't gotten that far and might never do so.

Severus watched as the Slytherin recovered his self-control, gave a short little nod, and fled the room.
This was the final evidence he needed. The blond was in love with his son. And from his anguished expression, Draco never expected to be granted the chance to act on that love, and yet he still loved Shadow dearly despite this. Well, Severus would just have to find out how impossible that future really was.

Shadow blinked his eyes and stretched, sitting up. He felt rejuvenated and rested, which was not always the case after Boy's sessions. He looked over at his father, who had settled in the chair across from him. "It went well?"

"Very well," Severus agreed. He sat with his legs crossed comfortably and linked his long-fingered hands over his stomach casually. It was going to take very delicate maneuvering to get an unguarded answer out of his son about Draco. "I must admit I was doubtful at first, but Salazar has really come through."

Shadow laughed. "Painful to admit, isn't it?"

"Maybe a bit." Severus shared the smile. "How have you been otherwise?"

"Pretty good..." Shadow sighed. He turned toward the hearth, staring at the flames. His arm rested over the armrest and his posture was relaxed. "Considering we're at war and we're not really doing anything about it." Severus was about to speak, but Shadow gestured him to wait. "I know the Order is working hard, tracking the Death Eaters and setting up warning alarms and support networks. And I know Sirius is on the hunt for Horcruxes, but all that is defensive. I don't feel like we have much more time."

"We'll be able to do more once the Dark Lord becomes public and more active. Right now, his followers are quiet. We can't attack without an opening. That would only tip our hand," Severus pointed out. "I have been through a war. Waiting is a key aspect. The side that moves too recklessly, without thought, is often the side that will lose. So far casualties and destroyed property are very minor. That is something to be thankful for. We are using the time well preparing for every eventuality, stocking up on rations and healing potions, honing our fighting skills much as you have the DA doing, and gathering as much information as we can. These are all very important."

"I know, but it doesn't feel like that," Shadow said wryly.

"That is partly your age talking." Severus laughed softly.

"Maybe." Shadow grinned, amazed that he really did feel better. He hadn't realized how much was being done behind the scenes. It comforted him to know that the Order was still taking the upcoming war seriously and not relaxing their guard after the long silence of these last few months from the Death Eater front.

"Of course, having friends to help you take your mind off things helps," Severus offered casually.

"Yeah," Shadow agreed and smiled thinking of flying with Draco, not realizing how much that soft smile told his father. "Draco and Neville make sure I don't obsess too much."

"Friends help remind us of what is truly important," Severus said, eyes watching his son very carefully. "They remind us what will be there when the war ends. They make sure there is enough left of you that you won't be lost when that time comes. Have you contemplated what you will do after the battle is over?"

"Professor Flitwick talked to me a bit about my career plans last week," Shadow admitted. "I told him I hadn't really thought about it. He didn't seem to think that strange. He said there was so much
"What kind of occupations are you considering?"

"I hadn't really thought of a job." Shadow smiled and met his father's eyes, his own sparkling playfully. "Working can come after a long vacation. I want to travel a bit, maybe see Egypt or even America."

"By yourself?" Severus asked, arching an eyebrow curiously. "Do you see any grand romance or relationship on this great adventure of yours?"

Shadow looked back at the fire, his mood doused, becoming pensive, but his posture didn't change too much. He still wasn't defensive or closed off. Yet. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because…" Shadow looked back at his father. The debate of whether to talk about it or shut down was warring clearly in his troubled eyes. "I don't think anyone will know how to deal with how hard a relationship would be for me. How could they?"

Severus considered this for a moment before answering, his fingers steepled his fingers under his chin thoughtfully. "It is true that your partner wouldn't completely understand what you have been through, but that does not have to be a disadvantage. Their inability to truly comprehend why you are the way you are can be a comfort. Imagine if they did go through what you did. Imagine dealing with someone very much like yourself. How would that help? A truly loving partner would be patient and willing to help you through things as much as they could."

"But why should they have to do that?" Shadow exclaimed, disgusted with himself. He covered his face for a minute, rubbing at his cheeks before staring back at his father. "Why would I want to put all that crap on someone else?"

"Because you can't stop someone from loving you. By shutting them out, you hurt them more than if you let them share your burden. You have the power of granting yourself and someone else great happiness by opening your heart to someone," Severus answered easily. He would never have had that wisdom to share with his son if it weren't for Amalia. With a pang, he wished she were here. She would know what to say to Shadow.

Shadow said nothing to this, crossing his arms and staring moodily at the fire once more. When Severus merely stared at him for long minutes, the teen finally looked back with an annoyed glare. "You keep saying that relationships make people happy and healthy, but what happens when what you think is healthy turns out to only make your sickness worse?"

"Are you saying that a loving relationship would be unhealthy?" Severus drawled.

Shadow flushed, angry at his father's tone. "Relationships can be bad! What about abusive relationships? Or what if one person is just being manipulated? Or what about people who are together for a long time and suddenly one partner leaves for a younger lover? Very few relationships have a happily ever after, Severus! So, yeah! They can be unhealthy and make the situation worse."

"I agree that some relationships end badly, but the ending of such relationships doesn't discredit the good the relationship did when the person was in it. You know first hand how love can change a person for the better. We are creatures that need society, need contact from others to be truly well. Humans don't do well alone."

"So all relationships are okay?" Shadow challenged, irrationally furious. His hands were fisted on his
thighs and he could feel his lip curling in a snarl. "Is that what you are telling me?"

"No." Severus shook his head. "You know that is not what I am saying. I'm saying that it is a psychological and biological need for humans to search for a companion. Loving relationships are essential for our wellbeing. Even if such relationships were to end badly, they are worth it. Of course, unhealthy or abusive relationships are not good, but that is not what we are talking about here."

"Maybe we should!" Shadow challenged. "It was an abusive relationship that fucked me up. Who's to say I won't walk right into another one? Huh? What if I go out there and am attracted to a bad relationship because that is all I know? What if I start wanting more men?"

Severus met his son's eyes and saw the shock in them that he had said so much. He could see the panic, the desperate need to take back his words. His breathing became erratic as he jumped to his feet, fleeing toward the door. Severus had seen this coming and was ready. He spelled the door locked and stood facing his son, but he refrained from moving closer. He didn't want Shadow to feel stalked or hemmed in.

"I don't think it possible for you to walk into an abusive relationship," he said calmly, exuding absolute certainty. "You are too sensitive to such things. You have no desire, not even as Boy, to be degraded. Boy endures, yes, and may even believe he deserves punishment, but he doesn't go searching for it. Neither do you. If someone were to hurt you or tried to make you do something you didn't want to, I have full confidence that you are now strong enough and wise enough to know how to defend yourself. You are no longer a confused, helpless twelve-year-old boy, Shadow. Nor are you mentally insane. Any relationship you find, be it with a man or a woman, would be a healthy one or you would not be attracted to that person."

Shadow was panting, leaning his head against the door, pretending that he was alone because he couldn't bear the thought of listening to this, of his father suspecting the truth.

Severus could see that Shadow's eyes were clenched and that the teen was still trying to run from this. "Shadow, whoever you happen to fall in love with will have nothing to do with Lockhart. If it happens to be a boy, that will only be a coincidence. You aren't so immature as to be attracted to someone for their physical body or looks alone, in any case. Whoever you chose will be a person to be respected and possessing great internal strength. It could not be otherwise, do you hear me?"

What was his father saying? Why wasn't he remarking on how impossible it would be for him to love a boy because it was wrong and sick? Especially after what happened to him. He felt lost and confused. He was absolutely terrified his father would confirm he was seriously ill - more so than he knew he already was, what with his DID - but he was equally terrified his father was going to say it was okay. Then he'd have no excuse for continuing to ignore the situation. And he just couldn't deal with it right now. He didn't have it in him.

"Male or female, Shadow, you would only chose a partner who is worthy of your love," Severus insisted. "You are too smart and discerning for anything else. The only way Lockhart could influence your decision is by making you deny a relationship out of misguided fear, and I'm proud of you for working so hard to keep that from happening. You are confronting what happened and healing the mark it left on you. You're giving yourself a chance, which is more than a lot of people have done who have been hurt as you have."

Shadow felt tears burning his cheeks. No one had ever believed so strongly in him before. It was humbling and comforting. Maybe… just maybe… he could still play this off. If he could just pull himself together, he could test what Severus really thought about boys being together and still protect the secret he had been keeping for so long.
He wiped at his face and turned around, Slytherin plots swirling in his head. "It's these dreams, you know?" he said as casually as he could. His lips flashed in a quick, nervous grin. "It feels so good until I wake up... I guess I don't see how two guys can... want that... I know it feels good, but it wasn't right... I don't see how it could work out..."

Severus gestured at the couch and used the few minutes he gained while they were getting settled to think of an answer. He linked his hands over his knee and slowly felt his way through this very sensitive topic. "If two men or two women love each other, then it isn't hard for the physical aspect to work out. In fact, it is reported to be more intense because the two partners are able to intimately know what feelings and sensations they invoke with each action, since they themselves feel it."

"But they don't... naturally fit..." Shadow desperately didn't want to talk about this, but he found the strength somewhere to force himself to sit and listen further.

"No two bodies can fit perfectly; there will always be arms and legs in the way, dissimilar curves, etc. Only the illusion of fitting perfectly can be granted and that is caused by a heightened sense of wellbeing and love for that person."

"Yeah..." Shadow bit his lip, fidgeting with his sleeves to displace some of his anxiety. His eyes darted everywhere, never looking his father in the face. He was beginning to think he should have gotten out when he had the chance. "I guess so. I was just asking because of the dreams. It's not like I like anyone or anything," he said in a rush, blushing furiously, and almost panting in his effort to breathe.

Severus nodded, pretending to believe the obvious lie, and offered a smile, trying to ease the tension in Shadow's shoulders and face. "When Amalia and I came together... It was awkward at first. We were both so excited and nervous. She elbowed me in the face when we were trying to get her shirt off and I unknowingly made her leg fall asleep by cutting off her circulation during foreplay."

Shadow laughed weakly. He couldn't help it.

Severus nodded. "We laughed about it, too. When we calmed down, our bodies began to align and move in synch. I imagine that the same awkwardness and then unity would happen with a same sex pair."

"Just out of curiosity," Shadow asked carefully, his sweaty hands clamped on his thighs as he braced himself for the rejection and confirmation of his illness that he knew were coming. "How are gay relationships viewed in the Wizarding world?"

"Wizarding society tolerates same-sex unions better than the Muggle world, but it is still often made a private affair because the main duty of any witch or wizard is to produce more witches and wizards. Our population has been decreasing for decades. This is a real concern, but experimenting with your own sex when you're a teenager is accepted because it satisfies the raging hormones and yet protects from unwanted pregnancy. Also, those who were forced into an arranged marriage and are unsatisfied with their spouses are encouraged to find a lover of the same-sex. Bastards are not looked on kindly. There are those Purebloods that enter an arranged marriage only with the agreement that their bonded partner is recognized as an equal second spouse. There are a few openly homosexual marriages, and, though they are frowned on, they are still legalized and share the same rights as a heterosexual marriage. For example, Emmeline Vance was married to her wife, Charlotte Donovan. Charlotte passed away in the first war."

"Really?" Shadow asked, shocked. He remembered Emmeline well. She was the witch who had pitied him so strongly and whom he suspected of telling the Ministry that she thought he was being abused by Severus. He would never have guessed she was gay and had married another woman.
“Yes.” Severus nodded, smiling at Shadow's reaction. "Reardon Rookwood - Yes, the man from your vision. - also married a man, Henry Belvedere. They are still married. It cost Rookwood his status as the family Heir, the title instead passing to his younger brother, but he believed Henry was worth it."

"It seems they are all people I don't really like.” Shadow smiled wryly, but there was honest fear in his eyes. What if there was something wrong with all these people? With him?

"How about Deputy Headmistress Vector? She is unmarried, but she has been with Lenora Grey for years. And your godfather was madly in love with a boy once."

"Sirius!” Shadow cried out in shock.

"Yes,” Severus admitted. “Although I believe he is attracted to both genders.”

"I would never have guessed Professor Vector was… you know. She seems so normal,” Shadow murmured, but really he was still thinking about his godfather. He had no idea!

"Because they are normal. All types of people find love with others of the same sex. It makes them neither good nor bad. People's actions in the world do that, not their actions in the bedroom," Severus said firmly, holding his son's gaze.

"I get it.” Shadow looked away quickly, almost wincing. He glanced at the door with true longing. He had reached the end of his tolerance with the subject. All he wanted was to leave the room quickly. "I'm kind of hungry. Can I go? It was just a dream, anyway."

"Go on.” Severus flicked his wand behind him and the door unlocked.

Shadow nodded, relieved. "Well, thanks."

"That went much better than I thought it would. Let's hope I got through to him a little,” Severus murmured to himself when he was alone again.

Chapter end.
Accepting the Hard Things

Remus called for Severus to wait as the monthly staff meeting came to a close Sunday morning.

The Potions Master turned and lifted an eyebrow in mild curiosity.

"I was wondering if I could ask you something privately?" Remus smiled warmly at his colleague.

Severus nodded sharply and led the way down to his office.

Ten minutes later Severus was sitting behind his desk and gestured for Remus to take a seat in front of him. "I needed to speak to you as well," he said.

Remus took the seat with narrowed eyes. Severus was looking tired and he thought he could smell energy potions. That was never a good sign. He sat attentively, waiting to be told what the new crisis was.

"Last year you assisted with the removal of the spiritual leash Dumbledore placed upon Gabriel in an attempt to be able to control when he came Out."

"Yes." Remus nodded, remembering clearly the long ritual and the screaming pain it inflicted on Harry.

"I've been working on a theory," Severus began. He lifted a quill and flicked it absentmindedly. "We moved the leash to Demon. So that we would be able to, in an extreme crisis, force Demon into his Animagus form so that we would be able to limit the amount of damage he can do."

"Yes," Remus said again. He knew all of this. He had been there.

Severus sneered. "I have been trying to find a way since the adoption to allow Shadow to return to his Harry Potter image in an undetectable manner. The Boy Hero will have to make an appearance, and I want to prevent that from diminishing the security of his persona as Shadow Snape. Part of my research was derived from the rituals we used for the spiritual portkey spell."

"What have you come up with so far?"

"I am working on a potion that will suppress his new DNA and return him to his birth DNA and back again. That would make him secure against any diagnostic spells since it is not an illusion."

"That's incredible, Severus!" Remus cried, impressed.

"It will be impressive when I get it to work," Severus snapped. "I will need you to look over my research to help me predict the stress on Shadow’s body." Remus agreed readily. Ready to get back to work, Severus asked impatiently, "What was it you wished to speak to me about?"

"I wanted advice," Remus explained. "I'm worried about Neville. He seems to have understandably developed an aversion to homosexual relationships and I was wondering…"

He didn't get a chance to finish. Severus had tensed rigidly in his chair and blood had drained from his face. Remus hadn't seen such a reaction from the man in a very long time and it portended something very grave indeed.
"Unacceptable," Severus said lowly. "You will handle this, Wolf, or I will. And I promise you I will not be nearly as gentle."

"What is it, Severus?" Remus asked, tensing at the threat perceived to the boy he had come to think of as his cub.

Severus hesitated. He knew how dangerous it was to share information about Shadow without Shadow's permission, but it was vital that Remus understand the importance of this. "Unfortunately Longbottom's opinion matters greatly to my son," he snarled. "Should the stupid boy reject Shadow, I fear irrevocable harm will result."

Remus took that in, frowning, but then he began to understand and his mouth fell open. "Shadow… is gay?"

Severus sneered, his fingers whitening around his armrests. "Was I not clear?"

"By Merlin…" Remus couldn't believe it. The irony! James had every reason to accept a man as a lover - he'd had no bad experiences and a good man had been madly and truly in love with him - but though James tried for a while with Sirius, he just didn't feel the same. He was too attracted to females, Lily in particular. And then his son - who had every reason not to be attracted to men and probably hated with a passion his inclinations - was gay.

"You will not breathe a word of this to anyone," Severus hissed softly, a deadly threat glittering in his eyes. He stood and leaned over his desk threateningly. "Especially that idiot Black."

Remus fought back a snarl. "You don't need to threaten me, Severus," he said coldly, his voice tight with the effort to control himself. "I can imagine how hard this is for Shadow. I will not do anything to hurt him."

Severus seemed to accept that. He straightened and turned to one of his bookcases. He drew his finger along their spines and took down two: a small blue one and a large but thin red one. "These may help you with Longbottom."

"Thank you, Severus. I will go over them immediately and have Neville over for dinner sometime soon." Remus stood and took the books. "May I ask who Shadow has an interest in?"

Severus sneered, his arms crossed. If the wolf couldn't see it for himself, he didn't deserve to know.

Remus thought about it and then smiled. "Draco… Of course… They make a good pair."

"I'm glad you approve," Severus said sarcastically. "Now please leave. I have grading to do."

Remus bowed and left the snarky man alone.

xXx

Shadow didn't know what to think about the bizarre therapy session with his father yesterday. He was pretty confident his secret was still safe - he couldn't even contemplate the alternative - but now he was more confused than ever. It made him feel adrift in a dark sea of confusion and he hated that feeling, so he pushed it all to the back of his mind, determined not to think about it. After all, nothing had changed. He and Draco were just friends. It was just better, safer, that way. Besides, he had other things to worry about. Like the meeting with Hermione and Ron.

"You ready?" he asked his brother as Neville met him outside the Room of Requirement. They had decided it would be best if Draco didn't come. Shadow was certain that Ron and Hermione's reaction
would be worse if they realized Draco knew the truth long before they did.

Neville frowned at the door. He wasn't mad at Ron anymore, but he had never been close to Ron or Hermione. They had belittled him like everyone else during their first years here and seemed to think they had a monopoly on Harry, always keeping stuff from him and acting like Harry was giving him attention out of pity. He used to think that was okay and just accepted that type of treatment silently, but not anymore. He knew he deserved better now, thanks to his brother, Remus, and Ginny. Even Severus and Sirius had helped him.

"Nev? You okay? It should be me freaking out over here," Shadow said playfully, but his eyes were tense with nervousness. "You don't have to go in with me."

"No." Neville quickly shook his head. He was surprised to find himself looking down a few inches to meet his brother's gaze and felt a strong surge of protectiveness. "I'm going with you."

"Okay. Then let's get this over with." Shadow took a deep breath, feeling very grateful Neville hadn't backed out, and pushed open the door.

Ron and Hermione were sitting in chairs at a small wooden table. They had chosen to sit side by side. Shadow shared a glance with Neville, took strength from his steady presence, and intentionally sat across from Ron. He didn't want the fight between the redhead and his brother - whatever it was about - to interfere with what was about to be said.

"Sorry for all the mystery." Shadow smiled and ran his hand through his curls nervously. "Thanks for meeting me here."

"No problem, mate. What's up?" Ron asked, his blue eyes moving from Neville and back to Shadow several times.

"Well, there's something I've wanted to tell you for a while, but I wasn't sure how to say it, but it's about time it got said." Shadow could have hit himself. He sounded like an idiot! "First, I need to ask you to agree to a Wizard's Oath not to reveal to anyone what I'm about to tell you."

Hermione's eyes were large and round. Her face was pale and she looked to Ron for his reaction. The redhead didn't look much better, but he nodded firmly. They both suspected this had something to do with the war. Perhaps Shadow had learned something from his father. Both of them offered their hands and wands and were willingly bound to silence pertaining the following conversation. They stared at Shadow expectantly.

Shadow swallowed, feeling his pulse beating rapidly in his throat. "There's no easy way to say this, and I think you'd appreciate me just getting to the point, so here it goes. This summer I was adopted by Severus for my own protection and happiness; the same reasoning went into creating a false past for me. Before I was Shadow Snape..."

Hermione moaned, her hands covering her mouth and tears already springing to her eyes. Ron looked confused but like he knew something bad was about to be said.

"... I was Harry Potter."

Silence.

Hermione shut her eyes as if she had been shot. Ron stared at him dumbly. Neville had tensed and was prepared to move should either of the two react like Ginny had. Then Hermione lowered her head and began to weep openly, loud, heart-wrenching sobs.
"How? Why?" Ron asked hoarsely, dazed.

Shadow explained how Severus had been helping him come to terms with the abuse he had suffered at the Dursleys since Third-year during their many detentions. He told them how it was Severus who had helped him and Sirius run away that summer and stay safe, explained the poor shape he was in after the graveyard and the torture and how Severus saved him from that, brought him somewhere safe.

"Severus was the only one I could trust, the only adult who ever really looked after me," Shadow said softly. "And I wanted a family. He offered me his name, his home, his love. I couldn't say no to that, not when I felt the same. And I wasn't ready to face what it meant to be Harry Potter yet. Being Harry Potter had already gotten me hurt so badly, but I didn't want to leave Hogwarts. I have things to do here, so we came up with the story of my childhood so I could come back and still be safe."

"Do you…" Hermione rasped, still crying. "Do you hate us… that much? To… not tell us… when we've been… so worried?"

"I don't hate you," Shadow promised. He reached across the table and held her cold hands. "Hermione. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you so much pain, but I had to look after myself for a while. And… I didn't know if I could trust you. Either of you," he admitted, glancing at Ron. The redhead just stared back, eyes almost dead. "That doesn't mean I didn't care. I just couldn't risk it. I have to be so careful now."

"I get it… I do… Especially after how we kept letting… you down," Hermione sniffled, clinging to his hands. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Why are you telling us now?" Ron asked dully.

"Ginny found out," Neville spoke for his brother when Shadow hesitated. They both knew how this would sound. "She told Shadow if he didn't tell you guys, then she would."

Hermione began crying even harder and pulled her hands back to her face.

Ron looked away, his hands clenched at his sides. "All this time I've been missing my best friend. Turns out I never had one."

Shadow said nothing to that. What could he possibly say? It was sadly true. He hadn't been Ron's best friend in a long time. The redhead stood and stiffly made his way to the door. He didn't look back once as he left and Shadow didn't stop him.

"You must think… we're horrible people!" Hermione sobbed.

Shadow stood and went around to her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "That's not true. You were young. So was I. Neither of us knew how to deal with what was happening. Look, I wanted to tell you before now. Ginny didn't have everything to do with it. I do trust you more than I did. We've all grown up, but I guess I kinda liked you thinking of me as Shadow. You're my friend now and there was none of that baggage that was between you and Harry. I liked that."

Hermione laughed. "No wonder you got the Buddhist and Vishnu thing mixed up. You're not even there!"

"What are you talking about?"

She explained about how Vishnu is actually a Hindu god and how she thought it was a sign that maybe Harry was in trouble.
Shadow smiled wryly. "Severus didn't even catch it. Guess he doesn't know that much about
religions in other countries either."

The door opened and they turned to see Ron standing there. The redhead hesitated, but then he
walked over. His cheeks were stained with tears, but he looked relatively calm. He grabbed Shadow
into a hug. Surprised, Shadow tentatively held him back.

"I was a prat. I know it. I shouldn't blame you for not telling us, but it's hard. We were scared, man.
Really scared for you," Ron said thickly, letting go. "It hurts that Gin made you tell us. We'd still not
know if it were up to you. But I'm glad you're okay. That makes up for a lot of it, I think."

"Thanks, Ron. And I'm sorry. I told Hermione that it wasn't just that I don't trust you, because I do
now, but that I like being Shadow to you guys. I liked that all that stuff that happened between us
when I was Harry Potter - like with the tournament - wasn't between us and now it is again. You
know?"

"I can see that." Ron nodded. He pulled Shadow back in for another quick hug. "Sorry. I'm just so
glad you're okay. I thought you were dead for a while there. I've really missed you, mate. It's not the
same without you."

"Thanks." Shadow smiled shyly.

"Oh, you guys!" Hermione cried, breaking into tears again, but this time she was grinning like a
loon. She leapt from her chair and hugged both of the boys to her tightly, laughing and crying at the
same time. Shadow looked over at his brother helplessly. Neville managed a small smile in return,
but his countenance was still tense and serious.

And he was right to be worried. Ron and Hermione were handling his revelation too well. They sat
down again and they asked Shadow what he had been up to. Within minutes, Hermione was asking
why he told Neville the truth and not them while Ron was questioning why he was in Slytherin and
getting so friendly with the snakes, Draco in particular.

Shadow sighed. He wasn't going to tell them about his DID, so instead he said the Hat had originally
wanted him in Slytherin and that he went with it this time because he thought he could make a
difference there. Plus, being in Grynffindor might make people suspicious of his past identity. He
didn't say anything about Draco. He didn't feel it was any of their business. Hermione wisely didn't
push it, but Ron couldn't let it go.

"But they're snakes!" The redhead looked baffled. "How can you trust them?"

"They're kids and teenagers, Ron," Shadow admonished with a scowl. "Haven't you been listening
to me at DA? I mean what I say there."

"But Malfoy's just tricking you! No way would he go against his Death Eater father! Neither would
Nott Jr. or any of them!" Ron argued back. He was honestly worried about his friend. He didn't want
him to get hurt. "They've already tried to kill you once with that cursed necklace thing that got Katie!
Have you forgotten about that? They almost killed her, and I bet Malfoy was the one behind that!"

"Not all of them have Death Eater sympathies. I'm not condemning all of them because a few are
misguided, and I'm not talking to you about Draco. I don't have to explain myself to you, Ron. You
will have to trust me or not; it's your choice."

"Trust you?" Ron yelled, his face brick red. "You've been lying to us for months! I think it's only
natural that we question where the heck your head's at! We're your best mates and you haven't said
more than a few words to us since you've been back!"

"If I recall, that wasn't entirely my fault," Shadow said stiffly, sitting rigidly and clenching his fists under the table. "You were suspicious of me at first because of my last name and my eyes."

"Because it's Snape!" Ron was on his feet, hands pressed into the table and glaring down at Shadow. "There was a time when you would have been with me on that one!"

"Come on, Harry…" Hermione pleaded. "Try to understand."

"I do," Shadow answered. He was able to ignore Ron's threatening posture for the moment because Neville was now standing next to him protectively. "That's why I'm answering you as much as I can, but there are just some things you're going to have to accept. I'm Shadow Snape. It's not a ruse or a cover. I really am Shadow. I'm happy being Shadow."

Ron and Hermione looked hurt by this statement. "Surely once the war's over you can go back to being yourself," Hermione said tentatively, eyes shining with tears once more.

"No, Hermione. I wouldn't even want to. I've left that behind. This is who I am now," he told her softly.

"This is nuts! I can't… I can't listen to this right now…" Ron was breathing fast; he looked torn between fury and confusion. Shaking his head, he quickly left.

Hermione rose uncertainly. Shadow met her eyes neutrally, not giving her anything, just waiting. Still crying, she offered him a trembling smile. "We'll talk later…"

"All right," he answered tiredly. He wasn't exactly looking forward to it, not when they were acting like this, but it wasn't anything he hadn't expected.

Hermione kept looking back, but she didn't know what else to say. It was all too much! Not only had Harry been here all this time, but it was like her worst fear had come to life - that Harry was lost to her forever. She never expected Harry himself to be the one to deliver the terrible news.

Shadow sighed and tipped his head back. He felt exhausted. "Well, that went well," he said sarcastically.

Neville put a hand on his shoulder. "At least it's over."

"Yeah." Shadow tried to find the energy to get up. "We should go bind Ginny to secrecy, too."

"I took care of it," Neville said with a tight, grim smile. "She wasn't happy about it, but she understood. You don't have to worry about her."

"Thanks, brother." Shadow tipped his head and met Neville's eyes. "You going to be okay? They're probably going to try to interrogate you."

"I'll be fine," Neville answered with a tight smile.

He almost wanted them to get in his face. That way he could justifiably let them have it. They had moaned and cried over Harry, promising to do better by him next time, but already they were falling back into old habits, thinking they knew better than Shadow and questioning his decisions. He understood that it was a huge shock, and maybe they would come to their senses after they thought about it, but it still made Neville furious.
"I don't know about you, but I'm ready for bed," Shadow said with a tired sigh. He got to his feet like an old man and walked stiffly to the door.

Still feeling protective and worried, Neville insisted that he should walk him back to the dungeons. He was glad Shadow didn't protest. They were only halfway there when Draco stepped out of the shadows. He was obviously waiting for his best friend. Shadow laughed quietly, amused at the two fussing teens, but Neville and Draco shared a serious glance and gave nods of respect to each other.

"I can take care of myself, you know. I don't need guards," Shadow told them, rolling his eyes.

"Of course you can," Draco said as if humoring him, but he gave a grin to let Shadow know he was only teasing.

Shadow tossed his brother a wave and walked with Draco the rest of the way to the Slytherin common room. He was thankful Draco didn't start questioning him about what had happened. He didn't really want to talk about it. He just wanted to go to sleep. He didn't even bother changing, just collapsed on his bed and was unconscious almost instantly.

xXx

The next morning Shadow made his way to breakfast with Rogan and Miles. Lillian decided to skip breakfast in favor of cramming for the Charms quiz later that day that she had forgotten about. As he took his seat, he noticed that Hermione and Ron both looked haggard. Dark circles lined their eyes, their clothes were wrinkled, and their hair was in disarray. Both kept flashing glances at the Slytherin table. Their emotions changed with each glance, alternating between pleading, worried, and frustrated.

Shadow sighed and pushed it from his mind. He couldn't do anything about them. It was pointless to get worked up about it. He was seriously regretting having told them, though. He was halfway through his eggs when owls arrived with letters, packages, and newspapers. Shadow easily accepted the *Daily Prophet* from the brown owl that landed in front of him, but he froze when he saw the front page headline.

**Tragic Demise Of**

**Ministry of Magic Worker**

Draco grabbed his wrist to better read the long article. It seemed that Broderick Bode, age 49, had been admitted to St. Mungo's at the end of last week and had been strangled by a potted plant last night while recovering at the hospital. They shared a meaningful glance.

This wasn't an accident like the article proclaimed. Bode had been assassinated because he might have incriminated the Death Eaters who attacked him. The Death Eaters were getting bolder; the calm before the storm wasn't going to last much longer.

All of Shadow's anxiety came rushing back. He could hardly concentrate in class. It felt like the walls were closing in. He thought of all the minutes, *hours, days*, wasted when he should have been doing something, *anything*, to prepare. Guilt and panic possessed him, making him twitchy and distracted.

"Mr. Snape!"

He jumped. Blinking, he realized he was moving with the press of bodies toward the Great Hall. It was lunch time. Turning, he saw Remus striding up to him. The amber-eyed man gave a quick wink
and flashed a toothy grin. **Sirius**, Shadow realized.

"I need to speak to you, if I may. Before dinner," the man said firmly.

"Yes, Professor," Shadow agreed, his heart pounding. He could only think of one reason why Sirius would need to speak to him. *Oh god, please let him have found something!* he thought desperately.

xXx

Getting through his Monday classes had been nearly impossible as he stared at the clock, waiting impatiently for the meeting that night with Sirius. Finally, Shadow was sitting on the couch next to Draco and Neville, staring at the door and wondering why it was taking Sirius so long to arrive. Severus sat across from them, and though he was still, Shadow could feel his agitation. The Potions Master hadn't been informed of the news yet, either, and he wasn't happy about it.

Finally, Remus-Sirius strode into the room. His usually well-kept appearance was askew and his grey-streaked hair was wildly framing his face. "Good, you're all here."

"Of course we are," Severus drawled with a dark glare. "Some of us know the meaning of punctuality."

"Stuff it, Snape," Remus-Sirius said happily. "I found one! I found a Horcrux!"

"What!" They all cried, leaping to their feet. "Where?" Draco demanded while Shadow called out, "Did you bring it?"

"I haven't actually retrieved it yet," Remus-Sirius admitted sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "I had only just found it when I had to come here and replace Moony. I did run a few diagnostics, though, and let me tell you, this place is locked up like Azkaban! It's going to be hell getting in, but I'll manage. It just might take me a few days."

"Let me see the report," Severus said firmly, extending his hand in an expectant gesture.

The ex-convict took a rolled up scroll from his pocket and handed it over. "I thought you'd want to see. Maybe you can help me with a few of the more serious Dark Arts protections."

"Where did you find it?" Shadow asked. His heart was racing. This was it! The break he had been waiting for!

"Well, we know that to make a Crux Horridis, you have to kill someone whom you have emotional attachments too - hate, love, whatever. I figured Old Volde wasn't so great at forming attachments later in life, so I stuck to what we knew of his younger days. I mean, three were made right in Little Hangleton. So, I started looking for his orphanage. Turns out that all the people running it were killed about ten years after the Riddles, but I couldn't find a Horcrux anywhere. I asked around and just last week someone mentioned a village the orphans were taken to for day trips once a month. I looked but still couldn't find anything."

"Get to the point!" Draco cried, frustrated.

Remus-Sirius laughed, his amber eyes glowing with glee. He loved having people hang on his every word. "Basically I found some cliffs. The perfect place kids were likely to explore. Sure enough, jackpot! I found a cave armed to the teeth with active Dark Arts defenses. Something's in there, all right. What else could it be but a Horcrux?"

"How strong are these defenses?" Shadow muttered, frowning. He moved over to stand next to his
father and read over his shoulder, Draco following behind him. The blond whistled lowly. These were way over his head.

"I have a few ideas, Black," Severus spoke.

"Good," Remus-Sirius nodded, still smug. He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned. "It's only a matter of time, now."

"Good job, Sirius." Neville smiled back. "I never would have thought of looking there."

"Thanks, pup." The man swung his arm around the teen's broad shoulders. "Now about some celebratory grub? I'm starved!"

xXx

Neville was so caught up in his thoughts about Sirius's news and Shadow's burning eyes - all the tension that he and Draco had worked so hard to remove from Shadow's features had come back ten fold - that for about five seconds, he didn't know why Hermione and Ron wanted to talk to him. Then it came back to him and he felt grim anticipation settle in his chest.

"Let's talk somewhere private," he said and gestured for them to follow him. He was just leading them out of the common room when Ginny ran up to them.

"I'm coming," she explained when the others looked at her. She had rightly guessed what this was about. Ron looked ready to protest, but she glared him into silence. "I'm involved in this, too." And she was sick of being left on the outside.

Neville met her eyes and nodded, though he still thought she was in the wrong for forcing Shadow to tell Ron and Hermione when he wasn't ready yet. Look what had happened! It would serve her right to see exactly what her interference had caused.

They were almost to the nearby snogging room when the twins happened upon them on their way back to the dorms from their late night wanderings. They were up to something, but no one knew what. Neville made a mental note to ask Shadow if he knew before the next DA meeting.

The twins shared a quick look, communicating silently, before Fred said, "Where are we going so late at night?" He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "And two ickle Prefects, too."

"Not out to do something naughty, are we?" George asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Maybe we should escort the little ones," Fred said as he flung his arms around Ron's shoulders, while George hooked his arm through Ginny's.

"We need to talk to Neville alone," Hermione said firmly. She was too tired and grim to play games. "Go away."

"They know, too," Ginny said softly. "They can come."

Ron went red and Hermione's eyes got wide. She bit her lip and nodded, her shoulders slumped in defeat. They got to the snogging room and the twins playfully fought each other over who got to put up the privacy wards. Ginny solved the dilemma by doing it herself. She gave them both a harsh look, telling them it wasn't time for their antics.

"When did he tell you?" Ron demanded furiously, his hot eyes moving from Fred's face to George's.
The twins shared a glance and shrugged at the same time. George answered, "Night he got to Grimmauld Place."

Ron swore, spinning around and punching the wall.

"Why would he tell you?" Hermione cried, eyes teary again. "You can't keep a secret to save your lives."

"On the contrary." Neville crossed his arms, staring darkly at his fellow year mates. "They did keep his secret. It was Ginny who couldn't."

Ginny went red, hurt and angry, but before she could snap something back, the twins were on her.

"Sister!" George cried, feigning shock as he grabbed her shoulders.

Fred clutched his chest and staggered. "I cannot believe it. Tell me it isn't true?"

"Stop it!" she snapped angrily, pushing Fred off her. She stomped over to her boyfriend and planted herself in front of him, hands on hips. "I've already told you, Neville Longbottom. I didn't do this to hurt Harry! My brother and Hermione needed to know. It was tearing them up thinking he was hurt or dead! It wasn't right and you know it!"

“No, I don’t know it,” Neville said lowly, not backing down. He wouldn't give on this topic no matter how much he loved her. “I place Shadow's wellbeing higher in importance than easing their worries. Not knowing made them upset, but it hardly threatened their health.”

The twins’ playful posture disappeared by this point as they watched this unfold. George was even frowning. "Is Shadow all right?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron bellowed. "He's fine! We didn't do anything to him!"

"No?" Neville scowled, pushing past Ginny to get in his face. "You said you'd be a better friend to him, but look at you! You're all over him for being a Slytherin! And you won't accept that he's made a better life there!"

Hermione put a restraining hand on Ron's arm. He was dangerously red in the face. "We're just trying to understand. We're not going to hurt him!"

"It's not natural," Ron argued mutinously. "Harry's a Gryffindor and suddenly Snape adopts him - which by the way is CRAZY! Snape hates him! - and now he's Malfoy's best friend and treating us like we're the enemies!"

"It's not crazy at all," Neville argued back. "Professor Snape hadn't hated Shadow since Third-year, if you'd only open your eyes! And Draco's changed. He went through a lot of stuff that you can't even imagine. You don't know these people! You have no right to judge them or act like Shadow can't make his own decisions."

"Maybe we would understand," Hermione cut in, separating the boys since it looked like they might come to blows again. "But he never told us. How can we understand when we don't know? That's why we wanted to talk to you. You need to help us understand, Neville."

"Don't you get it?" Neville jerked away from all of them and crossed his arms. "You don't get to know everything. You weren't there for him at the time, so you missed your chance to be there beside him while his life was falling apart. You don't get to come into the picture after the fact and say, 'Oops, sorry about that! Can you fill us in?' No. You have to either decide to accept things as
they are with how much Shadow willingly told you and stand by him as you promised to do, or you leave him alone and things stay the way they are."

"It's not that simple!" Hermione cried angrily. "He's our friend and we want what's best for him."

"He lied to us!" Ron yelled. "Don't act like we were the only ones who weren't good friends! We deserve to know what the hell is going on!"

"No, you don't. You don't deserve anything."

"Neville!" Ginny cried, aghast. "Why are you being this way?"

"Stop it, all of you!" Hermione yelled tearfully. "We didn't come here to fight!" She took a deep breath. "Neville, I understand that you don't think we were good friends to Harry, but we're trying to be good ones now. We don't understand his reasoning. For right now, let's put aside that he didn't tell us who he really was. I accept that he's now Professor Snape's son and happy with the Slytherins."

"Even though they'll stab him in the back in the end," Ron muttered darkly, still scowling at Neville.

Hermione slapped his shoulder to shut him up. "My point is he's keeping the people on his side in the dark, the people that would support him. The Order, for example. They are expending energy worrying and manpower searching for him, trying to protect him. They know the prophecy even if we don't. I assume that it says he's the only one that can defeat the Dark Lord. He's needed, and he's letting everyone wonder and worry about his whereabouts. It doesn't sound like a good plan. He should have at least told the Headmistress. He's putting people in danger by hiding like this."

"He's obviously not thinking straight," Ron said darkly. "This was probably all Snape's idea."

"Shut up, Ron," Ginny snapped. "Can't you think past that stupid House shit for five seconds! Slytherins aren't all evil. Even I can see that by this point."

"The man saved Shadow dozens of times and helped us all with the Animagus potions," George added. "Slytherins can be useful."

"The whole plotting and strategizing thing is what they're known for," Fred said with a grin. "I think if Shadow is getting advice from that corner, he's being pretty smart!"

"Draco's been a help in DA, though the rest of the Slytherins are keeping to themselves still," Hermione agreed. "But Ron's right that some Slytherins are dangerous. That's undeniable."

"Shadow's capable of telling the difference," Neville assured her, arms still crossed.

"Ha! He hangs out with Malfoy!" Ron argued.

"But that still doesn't justify him keeping the Order in the dark, Neville," Hermione persisted, her eyes pleading with him to understand her point.

"Shadow isn't some weapon to be used against the Dark Lord, prophecy or not!" Neville snapped at her. "They need to fight this war for themselves. Shadow will do his part, but we can't just let him fight by himself or act like we don't have to do our best because he'll save us in the end. It doesn't work like that!"

"We never said that!" Ron yelled at him, moving forward aggressively. Both Hermione and Ginny grabbed his arms to stop him.
"We need some popcorn." Fred grinned wryly at his twin. George snorted a laugh.

"You act like it!" Neville yelled back, oblivious to the twins' banter. "You act like it's wrong for him to want to live a life of his own, free from the Order, separate from the war. He's just a teenager; a teenager who has been severely hurt, who almost *DIED*, who even now has a fragile mind that could easily break *again*, but you don't see what's right in front of you! All you see is a lightning-shaped scar and the supposed obligations he should have to bear because of a prophecy! A prophecy I know, by the way, and let me tell you, it doesn't say anywhere in it that he has to enslave himself to the Wizarding world. He doesn't owe us his life or sanity!"

"Hey, mate," George said softly, moving forward and wrapping an arm supportively around Neville's shoulders. "Calm down. They get it now. It's okay."

Neville was shaking with adrenaline and he had to lean into the redhead to keep from falling.

"We're not trying to harm Harry, Nev," Ginny said, hurt in her voice and written plainly across her face. "We're not the enemy."

"We don't want Harry enslaved to the Order," Hermione explained, crying softly. "We just want him to have help. The Order is supposed to protect him, aid him. And they don't know. That's all I was saying. I'm afraid he'll go off and do something on his own and get himself hurt."

"He's not alone." Fred laughed. "Come on, you guys. Take a breath. Things aren't life or death here. Shadow has a father, lives with both Padfoot and Moony, has a brother, and has a very cunning Slytherin best friend in Malfoy. And trust me, Blondie would do anything for Shadow. He'd kill to protect him. That ruthlessness that you look down on, Ronnie-kins, will guard Shadow well, don't ya think?" He winked.

"And he wrote that letter as Harry, so the Order knows he's alive and well," George nodded wisely. "They'll be ready to help him when the time comes. Professor Snape won't let him do anything stupid and neither will we. You know the truth now. He can come to any one of us if he has a problem. He can trust us. Not to mention, if it comes down to it, he has a little army here at Hogwarts."

For several minutes there was silence in the room. Neville was pulling himself together and thinking maybe he had been overreacting a bit, but he couldn't help it. He was still so mad at them for pushing Shadow around in the past and at Ginny for forcing Shadow to tell them when he hadn't wanted to.

Ron and Hermione were lost in thought, feeling chastened and more hopeful at the same time. Ron was still doubtful about the Slytherin thing, but he could agree with his brothers that Harry wasn't alone. They would be watching his back, so maybe it would be okay. And he really did think Snape would look after Harry. Even he could see that the man really cared about his son - no matter how weird it was to think of Harry Potter as Snape's son. Hermione felt like her mind was racing as she struggled to find her bearings once again.

The twins were just shaking their heads at all the teenage drama, no matter that they were still teenagers, too. It was hilarious that they blew things so out of proportion. Was it really so hard to just accept how things were and move on?

Ginny was more confused than any of them. She felt she had done the right thing. I mean, she had seen how her big bother had suffered, truly suffered thinking his best friend was dead, but maybe she had handled it wrong. She could have tried to convince Harry to tell them instead of threatening him. She hadn't realized how it would look from his perspective. And she was surprised that Ron had reverted back to 'all Slytherins are evil' when they had all come such a long way in the DA.
Even Hermione's attitude had surprised her, but the twins surprised her most of all. When had they gotten wise? She felt like a little kid next to them and that was strange. She usually felt so much older than them. And they had known all along and hadn't said a word. They were Shadow's friends, just as Neville was. They put Shadow first.

She hadn't. She put her brother first. She knew Neville disagreed, but until now she didn't understand how much she had hurt Neville by pressing Shadow. Shadow was his only family really with his parents in the hospital and his grandmother and uncle so unsupportive. By hurting Shadow, she had betrayed him. She saw that now and was deeply ashamed.

"What happened to him, Neville?" Hermione spoke up quietly. Her tone and manner was sincere and completely different than the way she had walked into the room. "I know you don't feel comfortable talking about what happened to Harry, but... I love him. He's my friend. I want to help him. I want to be there for him, but I don't know what to do or how to help."

Neville sighed and sat heavily in one of the plush chairs in the room. "Look. I'll say what I can, but most of it's just too private."

"We understand," Ron said, his blue eyes tired. "And we're sorry. We're ready to listen now."

The girls nodded, agreeing with him. The twins dropped to the floor at Neville's feet, making their eyes big as if getting ready to listen to some thrilling story. Ron shook his head at them and took a seat on the couch, the girls sitting next to him.

Neville closed his eyes and tiredly rubbed at his forehead. "You know that the Dursleys hurt him. He told you so himself. It was really, really bad there. It left a lot of unresolved issues that Shadow didn't really deal with until Professor Snape got ahold of him. That was why Professor Snape kept giving him so many detentions. They were working on fixing the hurts left inside Shadow that are still not fully healed. That kind of stuff leaves nearly permanent marks, okay? That's all you get to know about that."

Ron and Hermione nodded silently, accepting that. Ginny said nothing, her eyes on her lap. She knew personally - in a way that Ron and Hermione didn't understand - that things could leave marks that couldn't be seen. The twins also understood because they had seen the results and experienced it first hand. They had seen Boy. They knew how seriously Shadow had been hurt.

"So Shadow learned to depend on Professor Snape in a way that he had never been able to depend on an adult before. Professor Snape couldn't really show that closeness because he was still spying for Dumbledore at the time and the Death Eater children couldn't go gossiping to their parents that their Head of House is nice to a Gryffindor, and the Savior of the Wizarding World at that. So you have to accept that there's a lot of history and care behind their relationship that you haven't seen."

"I can see that." Hermione smiled. "I'm glad they're so close. I know how much family means to Harry."

Neville nodded. "Well, this past summer, as you know, he was captured by the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. He was tortured for hours. If it weren't for Remus and Sirius healing Shadow constantly for three weeks, he would have died. He wasn't conscious until almost fifteen days after the graveyard, and he was kept to the bed for several weeks after that. He was just getting well again when he came to Grimmauld Place."

"Oh god," Hermione moaned, covering her face as she started crying again.

"He was scared of being captured again. The only thing they could think of to protect him was to
make him someone other than Harry Potter. So he didn't tell you who he was because every person that knows adds to the chance of him being uncovered and put in danger again, and that's nothing to take lightly. Shadow won't survive another torture session like this summer. Shadow's death becomes almost certain the moment the Dark Lord finds out he was Harry Potter."

Silence met this calm declaration.

Neville sighed. "Look. He hasn't really lied to you. The Shadow you have gotten to know really is who he is. Shadow is the truth, more than Harry Potter ever was, trust me. So in a way, he was being honest for the first time. He was being wholly himself instead of putting on airs that he thought were expected of him as Harry Potter. With all that gone, you are seeing who he really is. Forget Harry Potter. He was an illusion. Harry Potter was a boy keeping the secret of his childhood and struggling to be the hero he thought he had to be by keeping all his fears and vulnerabilities away from you and everyone else. Can you see that?"

"Yes." Hermione sighed. "It's just hard to admit that we didn't really know him. But I'm glad I'm getting the chance to know him now."

"Yeah," Ron said thickly. He lifted his eyes to Neville. "Yeah, and I'm not going to mess this up. Shadow's my friend. We may not be best friends, but that's okay. I'd rather have something real."

"Sounds like someone is growing up," Fred cooed at his brother. "Just wait till Mother hears!"

"Stop it!" Ron blushed hotly, glaring at his older brothers. George just laughed.

"I'm sorry, Neville. I should have listened to you," Ginny said softly. "I just don't seem to be able to do the right thing by you. I'm so sorry."

Neville got up and grabbed her arm. He pulled her over to him and sat back down, settling her half on his lap, half next to him. Ron blushed while Hermione smiled brightly at them.

"It's okay, Ginny, but I need you to trust me, okay? Sometimes I do know what I'm talking about. Especially when it comes to Shadow."

She nodded into his shoulder, hugging him tight.

"About that..." Hermione said tentatively. "What do you recommend we should do? Should we just leave him alone and act like nothing's changed?"

Neville thought about it. "Treat him like Shadow and you'll be all right. Don't assume you know what's going on with him. Always ask, and if he doesn't want to answer, don't make him. You could tell him that you accept this and that you'll stand by him, but don't expect him to share everything with you right away just because you're still his friends."

"Good advice," George said with another laugh. He stood and ruffled Ginny's hair, making her growl and peek out at them with a glare.

Fred pulled Ron and Hermione to their feet. "I think it's time to go unless we want to watch these two get their groove on."

"Gross!" Ron cried, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Don't say stuff like that!"

Laughing, the twins herded the two out the door, throwing winks back at a blushing Neville and a smiling Ginny before shutting the door firmly behind them.
"Sometimes I feel like I can forgive them the torment they put me through growing up." Ginny sighed and snuggled contentedly into her boyfriend's warmth. "You really forgive me, Nev?" she asked shyly, peering up at him.

"Yeah." Neville smiled and ran his hand through her gorgeous hair. "Of course. Just…" His expression turned serious and he held his eyes with hers. "Don't put me between you and my brother again, okay?"

"I won't," Ginny vowed sincerely. She leaned forward and kissed him softly.

He pulled her more firmly against him and deepened the kiss.

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Tomorrow morning, the students would make their way to Hogsmeade's train station and ride back to London where their families would take them home for the Christmas holiday. Bright crystal light was pouring down from the charmed ceiling. Everyone was chatting happily about their up-coming vacations or how much they were going to miss their friends. Laughter danced up and down the four House tables, and the teachers watched the playful children with fond smiles. It was good to see some things remained untainted.

"Where's Hagrid?" Shadow spoke up suddenly, noticing the half-giant's absence from the staff table.

"Didn't you hear?" Lillian asked with a wide smile. "The oaf got sacked. If you ask me, it's the one good thing Umbridge did for us."

"What?" Shadow frowned.

"You didn't know him," Rogan said with a shake of his head. He picked up a biscuit and gestured with it. "That man's idea of lovable creatures was downright dangerous."

"He's staying on as the Grounds Keeper," Miles added, shrugging. "Professor Grubby-Plank is coming back to teach next term."

Shadow glanced over to the Gryffindor table. Now he knew why Ron and Hermione looked less enthusiastic than the rest of the table. He was about to say something else when something caught his eye. There, on the ground, a carpet or something was slowly creeping further into the room. His eyes got large as he realized what he was seeing.

They were toads! Hundreds of them were hopping through the crack of the Great Hall doors and making their way through the room. Some girls shrieked and all eyes turned to the strange phenomenon. Shadow cracked a smile when he saw the slimy green things wearing large red bows around their neck and had long black eyelashes. Pansy and Lillian screamed as two hopped up onto the Slytherin table near them. One croaked.

Draco gasped, covering his mouth to hide the sudden laugh. The frog had said "UM-bitch!" while batting it's girly, froggy eyes.

Shadow snorted and looked over at the twins. Fred and George were standing, clapping at the display as if giving whoever was behind the prank a standing ovation, but he wasn't fooled. This had Weasley written all over it.

"Who has done this?" Umbridge demanded in her shrill voice. Her eyes were glittering dangerously. A toad sat fat and happy in the center of her breakfast plate, croaking away.
The Headmistress stood slowly, showing her indifference on her face. "If anyone has any information about this prank, please step forward."

"It was you!" Umbridge hissed, pointing at the twins.

Fred and George made their eyes wide and innocent. "We wouldn't! We learned our lesson, Professor! Honest, this wasn't us!"

"Dolores? Do you have proof that they were involved?" McGonagall asked casually.

"No," Umbridge answered with an evil smile. "But I will."

She turned and stormed out of the hall, ruthlessly stomping on any toad that got in her way. Girls shrieked or groaned at the disgusting display. Many of the toads followed the woman, but most stuck to the students. They followed people around all day, happily croaking "UM-bitch" for anyone to hear. At lunch, they even croaked to the melody of Christmas Carols. Umbridge canceled classes to corner and interrogate students. She blew up as many toads as she could, but there were always more.

"I like your hat," Shadow said with a smile as he stepped up to Luna. They were making their way to dinner and she had a toad sitting on top of her head. It was happily croaking away to the tune of Jingle Bells.

"He's very talented. I thought I'd help him. His voice projects better from up there, don't you think?" Luna asked dreamily, her blue eyes smiling up into his.

"Definitely." Shadow laughed and wrapped his arm around her shoulders to give her a brief squeeze. They separated and went to their respective tables. Draco lifted an eyebrow at him, but he only shrugged in answer. Both looked over as Umbridge came storming into the Hall. She was red-faced and looked like she had been through the wars. Toad guts spattered her clothes and hands. It didn't seem like she could get it off.

Shadow and Draco had a hard time eating their meal between their loud snickers.

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"Avada Kedavra!"

Terrified, knowing someone was trying to kill him, he jerked to the side, past the blazing, deadly green light. His body felt smooth, powerful, and flexible. He missed the light by a surprising amount. Turning his strange eyes toward the threat, he saw the outline of a figure standing with wand outstretched in front of the door he must go through.

He was thrown a bit by the way everything looked like they were in a fishbowl. Even the colors of things were distorted, but that wouldn't stop him. Rage filled his veins and he reared off the ground and hissed. How dare this pathetic man try to kill him? He'd kill him!

The man's arm tensed, his wand was coming around again, and Shadow struck. Once. Twice. Three times. His fangs plunged into warm flesh, screams vibrated along his scales as delicious tangy blood flooded his mouth. Ribs splintered beneath his jaws and he released, worried bone would pierce his soft mouth.

Coiled and tense, ready if the man should try to kill him again, Shadow watched as the man collapsed backward against the wall. He wasn't screaming as much, but that may because he didn't
have enough air. Blood was foaming up around his lips and spilling down his chin. Shadow's chest was burning… BURNING… Hissing with agony, he couldn't figure out how the man was still hurting him. He tensed to spring forward again…

… and instead launched himself out of his bed in his dorm room. Gasping, clutching at the lightning bolt scar blazing on his chest, he crawled away from the bed, wishing he could crawl out of his own head. He was crying, moaning with pain. Shaking, he gathered all his will and control to cast a wandless, non-verbal spell. A silver stag dove through the floor in search for Draco.

He must have passed out because the next thing he knew Draco was shaking him and calling his name with fear in his voice. Shadow sat up slowly. His chest was still throbbing and he was damp with sweat. His hands were still shaking, the taste of blood still in his mouth. He looked up into Draco's worried grey eyes and clung to his steady arms.

"I… Nagini… Attacked…"

"Calm down," Draco murmured softly. He crouched and practically pulled Shadow into his lap, rubbing his back and arms, trying to stop the faint trembling in the brunet's muscles. "It's okay. Just tell me what happened."

Shadow closed his eyes and took great gulps of air, forcing himself to think clearly. "I attacked… I mean, Nagini attacked… Mr. Weasley in front of the Department of Mysteries. Go, Draco! Tell Severus! Tell the Headmistress! He's dying!"

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"Ron. Ron, wake up," Remus-Sirius called softly, shaking the redhead.

"Wha…” the teen answered groggily, his blue eyes squinted in slits.


In less than a minute, he was in the twins' room. Fred and George became alert almost instantly and they followed on his heels as he led them into the common room. Ginny was already there, arms wrapped around herself, face pale with fear. Ron had just arrived and had been asking her questions, but she didn't have any answers to give him.

"What's going on?" Ron demanded fearfully.

"Come on," Remus-Sirius said. He led the four teens up to the Headmistress' office.

McGonagall's graying hair hung freely down her back. She was wrapped in a sleeping robe, but she was awake and her face was lined with worry. Professor Snape stood in the shadows by her desk. He was dressed and he had his arms crossed over his chest in a very foreboding manner. His dark eyes seemed like holes in his head. The teens froze in the doorway, knowing bad news was coming.

McGonagall gestured them into the room while Remus-Sirius kindly pushed them forward so he could shut the door. "Your father was attacked. He's at St. Mungo's right now," she told them.

"What?" Ron whispered, shocked, as Ginny burst into tears and buried her face in his chest. He held her reflexively, not really aware of what was happening.

"How bad?" George asked, demanding the truth.
"You need to go to Grimmauld Place. Your mother will be brought to you soon," McGonagall said, avoiding the twins' steady gaze.

Without another word, Remus-Sirius helped Ron and Ginny floo first. The twins quickly grabbed some floo powder and followed their youngest siblings. The disguised Animagus leaned against the mantle, feeling desperately sad that another group of children would be forced through such a horrible experience.

"How's Arthur, Minerva?" he asked softly.

"They don't think he'll make it," she answered. Grief touched her face briefly before she shook her head and pushed it away. "He has a chance due to the quick warning we received from Potter. How is that, by the way, Severus?" She turned her hard eyes on the Potions Master. It was obvious that she was not about to accept half-truths. "How is it that an owl from China got here so fast?"

Severus met her gaze unflinchingly. Nothing would induce him to betray his son.

"Perhaps he dreamed this happening a night in advance and it only now reached us," Remus-Sirius offered nervously.

"Perhaps," McGonagall agreed, "but I am not satisfied with that answer. In fact, I am certain that more is going on here than I know. First, why would Potter keep contacting you, Severus? Why not me or even the Weasleys?"

"He has no reason to think they would believe him. As for you, he may not know if he can trust you. He does not know of the Order," Severus answered easily.

"Why haven't you told him to trust me?" she countered, taking a predatory step forward. "Why would you agree to be the middle man in such an arrangement?"

"I have no way of communicating back to him. No owls reach him, as you know," Severus sneered.

"That is strange that he wouldn't allow for news in return." McGonagall smiled coldly. "What I remember of Potter, he would not be so easily resigned to waiting for news, especially since he will want to know if his best friend's father will indeed survive."

Silence met her declaration. She eyed both men. She was starting to think that it wasn't just Severus in on the conspiracy and that made her even angrier. "No. I think you both know where Potter is. I think he is close and reachable. I think you helped him construct this absurd cover about China, which Miss Granger has informed me has holes in it regarding the temple in which he says he is staying. This is too important to keep from me, Severus, Sirius. You know how much is riding on his safety, as well as our ability to aid and protect him. Things are going to get worse from here on out. He can no longer remain in hiding. Do you understand?"

Neither the disguised Sirius nor Severus responded. They stood straight and rigid, their faces blank.

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at them. "You leave me no choice. The Triad has agreed that until you are forthcoming, your status as Order members will be revoked. You will not be informed of our movements or our intelligence regarding the enemy. You will be considered our enemy if you interfere in our actions. Do you understand these consequences?"

Both men nodded. Sirius's borrowed amber eyes looked sad but determined while Severus's eyes blazed with rage. So this was how far her trust in him went. It was very enlightening. Not only was she saying she would no longer give him information that could well save his son's life, but the removal of her protection put him and his son in danger with the Ministry. She knew this and was
trying to blackmail him. He understood that she was desperate and afraid, but he never thought she'd
go this far.

"You're dismissed," she said with a tired sigh. Her eyes were filled with disappointment as she
watched the men march out of her office and return to their respective quarters.

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Saturday came and though Shadow was sore, worried, and exhausted from his night, he rode the
train with the other students. He slept part of the way, his head against the window, with Draco next
to him guarding his rest and glaring at anyone who dared get too loud. Hermione and Neville were
both too subdued to present a problem. Luna also sat with them. She contented herself with reading
her father's magazine upside down.

Remus was waiting for them when they arrived. He looked worn, but he was quickly regaining his
strength after the full moon. He gestured them inside Grimmauld Place and informed them that there
was no word yet about Mr. Weasley. Hermione ran off in search of Ron. Neville went with her,
looking for Ginny.

"How are you?" Remus asked kindly, taking in Shadow's worn expression.

"Peachy," Shadow sneered, running a hand through his limp curls.

Draco moved closer to him, worry on his face.

Remus pulled the brunet into a hug. He smiled when Shadow didn't resist. "Everything will work
out. You'll see. Arthur's going to be fine."

Shadow nodded and pulled away. He knew his teacher was right, but on the other hand he couldn't
shake the feeling that he was the one that almost killed Mr. Weasley in the first place. He could still
taste the man's blood if he thought about it.

Draco saw the disgusted look on his friend's face and knew what he was thinking about. He reached
forward and gently placed his hand on Shadow's wrist, curling his fingers around it.

Remus smiled at the comforting and protective gesture. "Why don't you two go put your things
upstairs? You could take Hermione and Neville's things up, too."

The teens nodded and levitated the trunks upstairs without another word. They put Hermione's trunk
into Ginny's room and then had a brief argument. Draco didn't want to room with the twins this time.
He wanted to put Neville with them instead and stay with Shadow. Shadow argued that he hadn't
spent much time with his brother lately, but the truth of the matter was that Shadow didn't think he
could handle sleeping with Draco so close every night.

Once in a while it was okay, but more than that? He felt himself tremble a bit inside as half of him
wanted to leap at the chance. He wanted to be able to curl up against the blond, wrapped in Draco's
strength and support. He wanted to wake to messy blond hair and sleepy grey eyes. He wanted it so
much it scared him and he flinched away from the idea.

Without a word, shoulders stiff, Draco took his trunk and left for the twins' room. He carelessly
tossed his trunk into a corner of the room. Spinning around, he punched the wall hard.

"What's up, mate?" George asked with a weak smile. They hadn't slept at all last night, waiting for
news about their father.
Fred flopped onto the bed and grinned. "Do we have a roommate?"

"Nowhere else to go. Bill is rooming with the Weasel, and Severus's room is being taken by whichever Order member needs it," Draco answered, turning his back to the twins and rummaging through his trunk, trying to reign in his emotions.

"I recall you rooming with a certain Slytherin last time," Fred said with a mischievous grin.

"Lover's tiff?" George asked leadingly, watching the blond's tense back.

Draco spun around so fast that George didn't have time to defend himself. He was slammed against the wall with the blond's wand at his throat. "Watch what you say," he snarled.

Fred sat up, his eyes wide. "Whoa. Take it easy." He lifted his hands in gesture of surrender.

Draco sneered and backed away from George. "Just... Don't talk about that."

"All right," George said softly. He shared a knowing look with Fred. "But we're on your side, okay? You're good for Shadow."

Draco glared warningly and the twins wisely dropped it.

"Is Shadow in his room?" George asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah..." Draco said slowly, suspiciously.

"Great!" Fred leapt from the bed and marched two doors down to Shadow's room. He didn't bother knocking and just flung it open. "Shadow!"

"What?" the brunet sat up with a gasp, eyes wide and ready for an attack.

George smiled and jumped on the bed, wrapping the teen up in a hug. Still blinking owlishly, Shadow just stared over the redhead's shoulder at Fred who was hovering in the open doorway. Grinning, Fred ran into the room and began tickling the tired brunet. The laughter and shrieks quickly drew attention. Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville peeked in. They saw Shadow and the twins messing around and came into the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Mum said Dad's going to be fine," Ron said when the twins finally released their disgruntled and red-faced prey. Ron's eyes were red-rimmed and he looked exhausted. Hermione had an arm around his waist and her eyes were shinning with sympathy and relief. "She said Harry... you... told them he was in trouble. Without that he wouldn't have made it, so... Thank you."

Shadow flushed faintly and looked at the floor for a second before meeting his eyes. "Don't worry about it."

"You saved his life, Harry," Ginny argued, shaking her head. She moved forward and hugged him tightly. "We owe you."

Shadow pulled away from the embrace. "Don't call me Harry. I'm Shadow, remember? And it was an accident really, but I'm glad I could help."

"How did you know?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I had a type of vision, I guess." He shrugged, obviously uncomfortable.

"Vision?" Hermione frowned. Her feelings on Divination were very clear. "You're psychic? Since
"It's not that I'm psychic," Shadow said with eyes narrowed in annoyance. Although, he thought to himself, I do know Legemency and Occlumency. Muggles would consider that psychic. "I'm just… connected somehow to the Dark Lord. It's part of the prophecy that binds us."

"So he could know what you're doing?" Ron asked faintly, looking a bit sick at the thought of Voldemort watching them all right now.

Shadow snorted, smiling over at Ron. "Not unless one of you starts throwing around the Killing Curse."

"The Killing…" Hermione gasped, horrified. "That makes sense. You'd be sensitive to it because of what happened when you were a baby… But if that's what allows a brief connection… Then Mr. Weasley…"

"You're wrong!" Ginny yelled, eyes blazing. "My father would never use that awful curse! It's forbidden!"

The twins shared a knowing look. They didn't find it hard to believe at all. Ron seemed to have come to the same conclusion, but he looked like the world he knew was slipping away from him.

"We're at war," Shadow said softly. He wished he hadn't said anything. He hadn't meant for them to get upset like this. "In a war, you are forced to do extreme things to protect yourself and your people."

Silence met his gentle statement. Ginny was still struggling with denial, but the boys understood in a new way how serious things were. War wasn't a game. Hermione had her eyes closed, but a look of resignation had settled on her features.

"We should get some sleep," Neville spoke up, looking at the exhausted faces of his fellow Gryffindors.

"Yeah. Mum said we're gonna go to St. Mungo's to visit Dad after lunch." George nodded. He stood, pulling Fred to his feet, who turned and gave a very deep bow as if Shadow were royalty.

Ron yawned and said, "Oh, yeah. You're coming with us since Neville asked to visit his parents. They didn't think it worth it to leave guards just for you and Malfoy."

"Then I should get some sleep, too," Shadow said.

Ginny left with Hermione, her brothers following after her. The twins hesitated in the doorway. Fred winked as George said teasingly, "Don't worry about your blond. We'll take good care of him."

Shadow blushed hotly. Scowling, he threw a pillow hard at the teen's head, but it only crashed into the door as the twins left, laughing.

Neville tilted his head curiously at his brother. "What was that about?"

"They're just being stupid," Shadow dismissed it, but his heart was racing. Did they suspect?

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Mrs. Weasley got them up for lunch about half past noon and told them to dress in Muggle attire. She looked a mess, but she was smiling brightly and bustling around the house with an eager air. They all
changed into jeans and t-shirts. The Weasleys put on their favorite sweaters made by their mother, making them a very bright group. Bill, however, preferred his worn leather jacket.

Hermione wore a tasteful, dark blue sweatshirt while Shadow put on his black hoodie and zipped it closed over his white, short-sleeved T-shirt that had a large green recycle symbol over the chest. Neville pulled on one of his new sweaters. It was brown with thin cream horizontal lines. It looked good on him, but Draco looked the best. The blond had grabbed his fitted black jacket with large side pockets that he liked to put his hands in, and he wore it open over his white Egyptian cotton, long-sleeved shirt.

All the Weasley children - except for Percy, who was still working at the Ministry and didn't approve of his family supporting the Order - filled the table with chatter. Everyone ate at record speeds, eager to get going.

"Sorry, guys. I can't come. I have some things to do," Charlie said when lunch was over. "Tell Dad I'll visit him later."

"I will, dear," Molly said with a warm smile, hugging him. She looked at her other children. "Are the rest of you ready?"

The eight teens plus Bill nodded.

"Come along, then. I'm sure your father will be eager to see you," she said happily.

Molly led them all out of the house and toward the subway. They couldn't floo for fear of leaving a trail back to the safe house. Moody and Tonks joined them as guards. Tonks had short bright pink hair and wore tight black jeans with a blue sweater that said Party Animal in large, pink cursive. She was arguing that she'd attract less attention than Moody who was wearing a pinstriped suit and a bowler hat tipped to the side to cover his magical eye. The argument ended once they stepped onto the underground and mingled with the large crowd of Muggles. Tonks was proven right almost immediately.

The tension between Shadow and Draco evaporated as they stepped into the magical hospital. At the same time, they stepped toward each other as Neville took a step backward toward them; the three teens closed ranks for protection and support. Hospitals didn't bring back very good memories for any of them.

Mr. Weasley had been moved to the Dai Llewellyn ward up on the first floor. Green-robed Healers hurried about as they walked down the corridor. The clamor of the injured and deformed from the lobby cut off and the sudden silence, punctured by soft murmurs, pain-filled moans, and distant wailing was very disturbing in comparison. They climbed a staircase up to the first floor marked for Creature-Induced Injuries. They walked along until they came to room 109.

"I'll take Neville up to see his family," Tonks offered. "Arthur won't want too many visitors at once. It ought to be just the family first."

Molly nodded distractedly and herded her family into the room. Shadow got a glimpse of the room beyond. Mr. Weasley was sitting up, supported up by a few pillows, in a hospital bed with blindingly bright white bandages wrapped around his torso. His face was pale and tired, and his hair was greasy and limp, but his smile was genuine as he watched his family enter.

Mad-Eye remained posted outside the door while Tonks led them back toward the stairs. They climbed to the fourth floor in silence. When they reached the landing that read Spell Damage, they turned toward the double doors. Shadow froze, eyes wide, and Neville gasped softly beside him.
Draco stepped in front of Shadow, a growl rising in his throat as his latent magical energy rode the wave of rage that spiraled up through him.

Clueless, Tonks laughed at their reaction. "That's just Lockhart," she said causally, gesturing to the man who had his face pressed to the square glass window in the door. "Don't worry about him. He's harmless."

Shadow could only stare numbly as she opened the door and he got a clear look of his abuser. Lockhart was thin, almost skeletal. His skin was dry and pale, and his eyes were wide and haunted. There was no sanity or recognition in them, and it didn't look like the man even knew how to blink. Dark circles ringed his eyes so thickly that it looked like he had two black eyes. They had shaved his head, not having the time to keep up with the care that long hair demanded.

Tonks took Lockhart by the arm and gently led him back to the closed ward. She disappeared for a few minutes, assumedly to get Lockhart settled back into his bed, before she reappeared. "Well, come on," she called, frowning at them. "What's the matter with you three?"

"Shadow and I will wait out here," Draco said coldly, still vibrating with magic and rage.

"No," Shadow came forward from behind his best friend's protection. He put a hand on Neville's shoulder as he passed and squeezed. "I'm fine. Let's go."

Lockhart had the first bed by the ward door while the Longbottoms were in the furthest bed in the long room by a small window which let in winter sunlight. Neville passed the ill celebrity, his eyes darting sideways to make sure the man wasn't going to come after them. Draco stared unabashedly, his eyes predatory as he recognized that he would kill this man within nine months. Shadow looked straight ahead. He didn't want to see him if he didn't have to.

They walked by the three other inmates silently. One was a woman who was covered in fur, another a man who was mumbling to himself, and the last was a man who was talking to an imaginary mermaid floating before him. Flowery curtains blocked Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom from view. Neville pulled them gently aside and stepped through. Shadow and Draco followed closely behind him, tugging the curtains closed again.

Frank Longbottom sat in his bed, staring off at nothing, a faint trail of drool dripping down his chin, but Alice Longbottom sat up on her own and was humming. She smiled at Neville when he stepped up to her and kissed her gently on the head. He reached into the nightstand next to the bed and pulled out a brush. He sat quietly, brushing his mother's snow-white hair. The extreme stress of the Cruciatius Cruse had turned both her and her husband's hair white. They were thin and broken looking.

It was the most depressing thing Shadow had seen in a long time. He heard Draco's breath catch and looked over. Draco's face had gone very pale and he looked like he might faint. Shadow quickly grabbed his arm, keeping his friend from falling. He walked the blond over to the window and the chair sitting there. Draco fell into it, his eyes never leaving the Longbottoms'. Neville was so focused on his parents that he didn't notice any of this.

"My mother's sister did this," Draco rasped, barely above a whisper. Shadow only heard him because he was crouched down next to him. "If someone is a threat to you, you kill them. You don't do this. This is just sick."

Shadow nodded. He turned his head and looked back to see Neville gently wiping his father's mouth. "This is what we are fighting," he said softly, looking back up at the blond. "And this is why we'll win."
Draco met his eyes, his devastated expression shuttering closed. A hard determination settled over his features like a mask. For the first time, Draco realized that there was more at stake than the personal battle they were waging. They were fighting for more than their private reasons. They were fighting to prevent this from happening to more families. They were protecting the lives of hundreds and those hundreds now had faces. They had loved ones that would grieve. They were real.

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"Avada Kedavra!"

Shadow stood over Rookwood's mutilated and tortured corpse. Rookwood's blood and flesh was sprinkled over Lucius and sparkled prettily in the firelight. The smell of pain and terror hung in the air. He breathed it in like a fine wine. Torturing Rookwood as he had promised he would should the worthless man have been sweet indeed, but it was hardly enough to sate him.

"Anything to say, Lucius?" he hissed furiously. "So far your plans have led only to failure! My spies reveal we didn't even manage to kill that filthy blood traitor! Arthur Weasley has survived the attack!"

"My Lord," Lucius said, bowing so deeply he was almost kissing his knees. "Nagini may not have been able to fetch the prophecy because she doesn't possess enough of your pure essence. She taints it with her own soul. As you know, we are not fully aware of the effects of you using a live specimen for a Horcrux instead of an item. Now we know and I will not fail you again."

Shadow hummed thoughtfully, enjoying the man's utter submission. "Perhaps I should take things into my own hands," he said with a dark and sadistic smile. "Our other preparations are almost finished. I am ready to step into the world once more."

"You are brilliant, Master," Lucius groveled, getting to his knees, and looked up at his Lord with hungry eyes.

Shadow laughed, his blood singing with anticipation of all the death and pain he was going to cause, but then the laughter faded as he fell back, back into darkness…

Demon clawed toward consciousness. He had been halfway woken twice before - once to punish a useless maggot like the one he had killed tonight and once as a snake, where his hunting had been glorious. He had allowed himself to be lulled back to sleep, satisfied with the death and pain he had inflicted in these half-dreams, but not this time. This time he was too enraged to let himself sink back into sweet dreams of delicious death and destruction. He couldn't sleep, couldn't rest, couldn't think of anything else while that pathetic, insignificant, WORM existed.

He sat up, his eyes blazing Killing Curse green, and smiled a dark little smile as the shadows in the room converged over his body. He threw his head back and his arms out wide, a chilling laugh bubbling up out of his mouth as he was swallowed whole.

Alarms shrieked throughout Grimmauld Place, sending everyone in the old house scrambling from their beds or away from their plans and teas. The Hogwarts students woke with frightened screams and Molly bolted for her children.

Moody, Remus, Charlie, McGonagall, and Tonks moved in precise formations, casting defensive wards and diagnostic spells as they moved forward. Soon they were standing outside Shadow's door, looking into the room where the dark magic pulse had originated. Neville lay unconscious on the bed, his breathing fast and erratic. Remus and Tonks rushed forward, casting diagnostic spells.
"Looks like severe magical shock," Remus said, reassuring the others. "I'll take him downstairs and care for him there." This was convenient for him because he needed to get away from the others to get a hold of Severus. Demon was on the loose.

McGonagall had her bloodless lips pressed together, looking grim indeed, while Charlie solemnly canceled the alarms. Moody, his eye spinning wildly, growled, "Kid's been abducted." Tonks gasped and just now realized that Shadow was supposed to be in this room, too.

"I'll try and contact Severus," McGonagall said tightly, ice cold dread sluicing through her veins.

Charlie moved up beside her. "I'll go with you."

"Tell Molly the coast is clear, then come back and help me," Moody barked at the pale Auror Apprentice.

Tonks jumped and hurried to do as she was told, leaving Moody to examine the room, muttering questions about how dark magic of this nature got into the house in the first place. Tonks moved to the girls' bedroom, knowing Molly would have gathered her boys in with her and Ginny there. The six teens were crowded into the room - standing, sitting in chairs, on the bed, wherever they could fit. Molly was standing by the door, facing it with her wand ready to defend her younger children plus Hermione.

"No one got in. We're safe for now," she told the older woman, very glad she wouldn't ever have to face this ferocious mother on the battlefield. Then she paused and looked the group over again. "Where's Draco?"

Shock rippled over Molly's face as she realized she was missing a child under her care. She spun around to count for herself.

"He disappeared," George spoke up.

"The alarm went off and we ran to the door to find out what's going on and then he was just gone," Fred elaborated when his mother's blazing eyes landed on him.

"Didn't hear a crack. I don't think it was Apparation," George said worriedly.

"Where's Shadow? And Neville?" Hermione demanded, her brown eyes wide and frightened. "Are they missing, too?"

"No. Neville's downstairs. He's injured, but Remus will fix him right," Tonks reassured her, then reluctantly delivered the bad news. "Shadow's been taken. It looks like Draco was, too."

Chapter end.
A/N: Gore warning!

Damage

Deep black shadows slowly unraveled, revealing Demon crouching in the middle of the Janus Thickey Ward. His eyes glowed faintly green as he slid gracefully forward. His attention was locked on the Maggot. He was sitting up, his mouth working up and down, trying futilely to get a scream past his terror-constricted throat. The scent of urine wafted off the man as the Maggot's bladder released.

Demon's smile slid wider and he practically hummed in contentment. He lifted his hand and flicked his wrist. Lockhart was flung up and slammed against the wall, pinned above his bed. A flick of his other hand and the bed was flung away, giving Demon room to close in on his prey. Slowly, so very slowly, he let Lockhart slide down so that it appeared as though he was standing on the floor, but he was still securely pinned.

Demon stepped closer, his hatred swelling in his chest. Snarling, he lashed his hand out and grabbed the man by his throat, releasing the magic pinning his prey. Demon would see him suffer, see him flail and beg, but then a sharp crack had him spinning around, his black magic poised to rend and tear.

Draco staggered from the forceful landing; his grey eyes opened wide as he stared at the being bearing down on him.

Demon reached forward, ignoring the blond's flinch, and got a grip on the back of his neck. "Boy," he almost purred, his smile showing teeth. Pulling Draco toward him, he pushed the blond past him to face the man that lay in a crumpled, terrified heap on the floor. From where he stood behind Draco, Demon reached forward to caress Draco's smooth, pale cheek.

"I will destroy him. He will never hurt you again. He'll scream for you, Boy. They'll all scream for you. No one will hurt you again. They'll all die," Demon murmured in a mad little chant, his cold lips pressed to Draco's ear.

Draco was shaking. He couldn't help it. His muscles were tight, ready to run as soon as he got the chance. He didn't know why Demon thought he was Boy, but he knew that it was the only thing that was saving his life. Otherwise he would be in the category of needing to scream and die.

He felt Demon smile and let him go. Suddenly, he knew what had brought him. The Vengeance Ritual he had started: the man he swore himself to destroying was about to die and it was forcing him to bear witness. That knowledge steadied him and he was able to slightly calm his rocketing heart.

Demon strode past his Boy and approached Lockhart once more. He hadn't expected Boy to come and watch. Hot sizzling pleasure filled him, making him laugh. He would finally get to show Boy, show him he would destroy the world that had hurt him. It would all be gone and then they could sleep in peace. Boy would be able to rest without screaming, whimpering, crying into the dark.

He lifted a hand and shadows pooled in his palm, eagerly answering his will. A blade slowly formed and, with a flick of his wrist, it turned into rock hard obsidian. He brought the blade up to Lockhart's face, letting the wild blue eyes see how it absorbed the light instead of reflecting it. Then he slowly, slowly trailed it down the man's chest, cutting through the hospital gown, tearing through skin and
muscle. Lockhart began to scream, and Demon laughed in delight.

Draco felt his vision tunnel in - the rest of the world collapsing inward around him - as he watched Demon slowly, masterfully torture Lockhart. As if from a long distance, he watched blood spray through the air, saw it mist and steam slightly in the chill of the hospital ward. He saw it run in rivulets past Demon's crouched form and toward Draco's bare feet. The screams seemed like the wind, completely unfathomable, distant as Draco's mind dulled, trying to escape the scene before him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Healers push open the doors, coming to investigate. The cold, logical part of his mind still present understood that if they tried to interfere, which they would, Demon would kill them without a second thought, with barely a first thought. As if in slow motion, he watched them point and scream instructions as they saw the intruder hunched over Lockhart's bloody soon-to-be corpse. His wand came up; he felt his lips move but heard nothing and they were blasted backward. They flew through the doors and Draco locked them shut.

Distracted, Demon looked back at his Boy and saw the blond pointing his wand. He saw the doors slam shut. A face appeared in the window. A pathetic, worthless woman was yelling something and banging on the door. Demon smiled, imagining killing them all, killing every human in this godforsaken world, and then destroying the world itself just to make sure the plagued species didn't come back to torment him and his Boy.

Then he was looking back again at his Boy, impressed that he had finally moved to stop the pain, stop those that would hurt them. "Good. Good, Boy. Leave them there. I'll kill them. I'll make them pay," Demon whispered, promising peace in a dark, sleek voice. He turned back to Lockhart and hate roared back in. The Maggot hadn't suffered nearly enough. He bent back to work.

Draco shivered as Lockhart began to scream again. He was beginning to come out of shock. He had to get these people out of here, but what could he do? If he showed himself to be an enemy, Demon would attack him as well, and Draco didn't want to die so horribly. Not at Shadow's hands, even if Demon was behind his eyes. Alarms began to blare. Draco's heart began to race even faster. The Aurors would be coming in minutes.

The alarms seemed to shake the terrified patients trapped in the ward with him into motion. The woman covered in hair began to bark and yelp as she tried to escape through the solid wall. Mrs. Longbottom began to weep loudly, the ebony magic irritating her memories of the long forgotten time of endless pain. The two men - one who had hallucinations, the other who talked only to himself - both bolted for the locked ward doors.

Demon snarled, irritated at the further interruptions and snapped out his hand. Green lightning streaked from his fingers and the men tumbled, like puppets with their strings cut, permanently silenced.

Draco yelled something. No, maybe. Everything was happening too fast. The hairy woman, mad with fear, leaped at Draco. She was probably begging for help, but in her panic she was clawing at him, scratching his skin, drawing blood. Draco cried out in pain and tried to push her off. Then Demon was there.

He flung Draco to the side with superhuman strength. Draco hit the wall hard. He felt ribs crack and blacked out for a handful of seconds. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Demon was on top of the woman, literally tearing her arms off her torso.

There was blood everywhere…
... the smell...

Demon was laughing...

... a lone hand was sitting near Draco’s foot, looking all too real...

Draco pushed himself up, his left arm supporting his ribs. His right hand still desperately clutched his wand. He looked to the side and saw what was left of Lockhart.

The man's hands had been torn off and his genitals had been cut delicately from his body and then stuffed into his open mouth, which Draco found very poetic considering the man was a child molester. The skin of his chest had been peeled back, allowing Demon access to the exposed nerves. He was still alive, but, as Draco watched, the man breathed his last shuddering breath.

Draco looked back toward the ward doors. Someone was trying to break in. The doors were buckling inward and wouldn't hold much longer. Demon would kill everyone perhaps, but someone might get away and think it was Shadow. His friend would go to Azkaban or be executed instantly. His life would be over.

Draco looked back at Demon. The dark being stood, bloody up to the elbows; the ruby liquid dripped from his soaked curls and spattered his face. He was still smiling, his eyes blazing with a hateful rage that would never be satisfied….

Mrs. Longbottom was still screaming...

... red was everywhere - the sharp tang of it suffocating him...

The doors were going to OPEN and Shadow's life would be over...

Lockhart - Glad the bastard's dead!

…the two insane men… still shocked at the quickness of their death…

…the woman torn asunder… sick, feeling deeply horribly sick…

"REVEAL THE BEAST WITHIN!" Draco yelled, broken and frightened, desperate.

The spirit portkey that Dumbledore had created for Gabriel, which had been moved by Severus and Remus's efforts to Demon and specifically keyed to the alter's Animagus form, activated for the first time. Severus and Remus had hoped to use it to limit the demonic alter's power. Demon could do more damage with his magic free than as a werewolf, but they weren't sure what the results would be. No one had ever had such an Animagus form before. How would it work if it was daytime or on a night - like tonight - that wasn't a full moon? Would the transformation hurt Shadow's body? They didn't know. It was only to be used in an extreme emergency, hopefully never.

Demon staggered, his bloody hands rising to clutch his head as he arched back and howled. Draco watched, gasping, hardly aware of the sharp stabs of agony each breath caused. The doors burst in - he heard it, but he couldn't look away from his friend - and the sounds of many people marching in told him he wasn't alone, that he was far from safe.

Demon fell to his knees, his back bowing forward, stretching, the skin tearing, the howl of rage turning into a wail of pain. His blood-soaked curls looked like they were unraveling, spilling to the floor, curtaining off his face. Bones snapped and popped, cloth tore. The agonized howl went on and on.
Seven Aurors formed a loose half-circle before the wailing creature and shot off powerful spells.
Draco cried out, tears soaking his face as he reached out to them, helplessly trying to stop them, but
the spells didn't land. There was too much magic in the room. Black shadows writhed and thrashed,
lashing forward and crawling all over Demon's form. The attack spells were absorbed, making the
shadows swell. Demon was still screaming…

"Hold! Wait for it to finish! Stand your ground!" an Auror's authoritative voice cut through the
defeasing wail.

Draco stared, eyes wide and uncomprehending as two wings shot up out of the shadows cocooning
Demon. They were huge, about six feet long each, but looked broken in a few places. The large,
gorgeous feathers were mangled, some were even bloody. The massive, feathery things fell limply to
the floor, twitching brokenly. The wail tapered off and the shadows dissipated like fog.

The creature that was revealed lifted its face. It looked vaguely human with a touch of the werewolf
in the features. The skin was pale white, uncovered by hair, but the nose was longer than a human's
and flatter, the mouth protruding in a slight muzzle. Large teeth flashed for them all to see as the
creature lifted its lips in a silent snarl. The eyes weren't golden or wolfish at all. They were a dark
brown with no whites at all, just barely allowing the dilated pupils to be seen. They almost looked…
like a bird's?

Thick, long hair - blacker than night and more like dense shadows than hair - fell in a shimmering
wave to the floor as the creature stood. It was tall, reaching seven feet easily. Like a werewolf, its
muscles were lean and lanky, the arms hung longer than a human's and the knees were bent more
like a dog's at the knee. Two inch claws - or perhaps talons - tipped each finger and toe, but it had no
fur. The skin was soft and white, almost startlingly vulnerable looking. The wings lifted and curled
forward, halfway shielding the creature from view. The right wing looked in worse condition than
the left. The shadow hair weaved and rippled, rising a bit behind him like it was caught in a breeze
that none of them could feel.

A look of panic, vulnerability, and fear crossed the creature's face. It was Boy! Draco had no idea
how this had happened. He was deeply confused and very frightened, but he couldn't allow the
Aurors to hurt Boy. He leaped in front of the creature, putting himself in the way of the Aurors'
wands.

"Wait! Don't!" he yelled desperately, knowing they wouldn't listen but unable to do anything else.
He thought of the terrorized child who played with him, who cried brokenly next to him for hours,
and who practically begged for kindness. He couldn't stand by and watch that child be hurt.

The Aurors ignored him and fired off their spells, doing their best to aim past him, but they were not
going to hesitate when there was a murderous monster standing before them.

Draco screamed as one spell lashed his arm; his blood spilled to the floor.

The creature shrieked as the spells struck its already damaged wings.

The Aurors prepared to cast again as the creature roared with rage, a rage that was very familiar to
Draco. Draco closed his eyes expecting to be torn in two as he stood in the way between Demon and
his prey, but instead white wings surrounded him and he was pulled against a smooth, surprisingly
warm chest.

Looking through a small space between the feathers pressed against him, he saw the Aurors closest
to them fall, speared cleanly through on long black shadows. The hair… Draco thought in a daze.
The creature roared again, obviously disappointed that it couldn't reach the rest of its attackers. The sound resonated through the creature's chest by Draco's ear and the blond realized with a faint laugh that he hardly came to the creature's shoulders. The shadow-hair retreated and wrapped them in a second cocoon.

Draco was plunged in utter darkness. Absolutely blind, the sound of his panting breaths and the deep beating of the creature's heart filled his awareness. The slightly musky smell he associated with the Owlery and birds filled his nose, muffling the smell of blood. Then the darkness parted. He gaped. They weren't in St. Mungo's anymore.

They were standing in the center of some ruins on a small hill in the middle of a small town that Draco didn't recognize. Snow covered the ground and the winter winds cut right through his pajamas. Shivering convulsively, Draco held his arms protectively across his injured chest and turned around to watch the creature that had brought him here.

The being was kneeling in the rubble, its hair swaying passively, the dark eyes wide and unblinking. A small whimper was rising from its throat as the wings spread limply to either side. It had both arms wrapped around itself, but whether for comfort or warmth Draco didn't know.

The blond crouched, not wanting to stand over the obviously unstable being. The creature flinched, but instead of crying like he expected Boy would, it snarled warningly, the hair rising like hackles, poised to strike out. Draco froze. He didn't particularly want to die tonight. He began to suspect what was going on and it was a very disturbing realization.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you," he said lowly, keeping his voice even as much as he could as his teeth began to chatter. "Do you remember me?"

The creature tilted his head, suspicion obvious on the strange, animalistic features. A minute passed - then two - before the dark hair stilled and flattened again in an obvious sign of trust. The creature cooed softly like a bird and a white wing slid forward, leaving a small blood trail in its wake, and wrapped loosely around Draco's shoulders, offering comfort.

Draco closed his eyes and smiled. The ache in his chest had nothing to do with his cracked ribs.

The wing retreated. Draco watched as the strange creature scratched restlessly at the ground in pain and confusion. It sniffed at the air, whining and growling. Draco didn't know what to do. He knew the phrase that would reverse the Animagus form, but he didn't want to release the creature until he had an idea of what would happen.

He suspected that somehow the spirit portkey had invoked both Demon's and Boy's Animagus at the same time. No wonder the creature was so confused. A werewolf and an injured dove weren't exactly compatible. If he released the Animagus transformation, would Demon be back? Or would the two alters still be combined? Or would it be Shadow? Draco didn't think he could handle facing Demon again, but he couldn't just sit like this forever. He was beginning to freeze. His feet and hands were already numb. He moved, lifting his wand to cast a warming charm. The creature snarled and lashed its wounded wing forward to knock Draco's arm down. The dark avian eyes stared unblinking.

Draco swallowed. Okay, no threatening moves. Including using his wand.

Suddenly, the creature's head snapped up, its wide nostrils flaring as it caught the scent of something. The damaged white wings pulled in, compacting along its sides and back as the creature moved backward, obviously getting ready to flee. A deep, guttural growl was rising in its throat and sounded like distant thunder. The shadow hair whipped around in agitation, ready to kill.
Draco couldn't wait any longer. He couldn't allow it to run. What if they never found the creature again? Shadow would be lost forever. He jumped to his feet and yelled, "Revertio dormio!"

The creature howled as what happened in St Mungo's began in reverse. The creature's hair flailed and obscured the view as grotesque popping sounds and tearing could be heard under the creature's agonized wail. Draco looked back at what had upset the creature in the first place and saw that an old woman bundled against the cold and carrying a basket stood frozen on the street. He lifted his wand. It was enough. The hunched woman turned and hurried away at a frantic pace.

Heart beating hard in his chest, Draco quickly cast warming charms on his feet, hands, and torso. It wouldn't last long - the temperature had to be near freezing - but hopefully it would hold long enough for him to figure out how to get them somewhere safe. He held tightly to these practical thoughts as the screams of his love tore through his already shaken nerves.

Finally, the sound of the painful wails cut off. Draco turned to see Shadow lying naked among rubble and snow. He moved forward, but two green eyes flashed up at him in alarm. It wasn't Shadow.

Snarling, the alter got to his feet, still panting and sweating from pain and the physical stress the change had caused. He glared at the blond wizard before him. Black magic lashed out, flinging the wand the teen held far away. Then he leapt, knocking Draco down. He reached, planning to strangle the bastard to death. Everyone who hurt him would DIE!

Draco couldn't believe how fast his friend moved. He had no time to react as his wand went flying. Then the other teen was on top of him. He screamed as the sudden weight bore down on his injured ribs.

The alter jumped back, off the Boy. He stretched his hands forward and wrapped the blond in healing magic. He watched through wide eyes as the Boy sat up, gasping in surprise and relief, tears streaking his face. When it was done, the alter backed off; confused, angry, and afraid.

Draco tentatively felt at his ribs. They were healed completely! And the scratches from the woman were gone, as well as the gash on his shoulder from the Aurors. All of it had been healed in less than two minutes! He stared at the green-eyed teen, awe on his face. "Thank you," he said warmly.

A long silence passed. Both teens began to shiver. Finally, the alter said suspiciously, "You are Boy?"

"Yes." Draco nodded, relieved to be marked again as safe. "It's cold. I'm going to find my wand so I can warm up. Okay?"

The alter stared at him for a long moment before nodding. He lifted a long-fingered hand and the wand came flying into it. Draco stared at his wand and fought not to reach for it. After a second, the alter tossed it to him. Draco caught it, relief unfolding in him, and carefully, slowly, pointed his wand at his hands, feet, and torso again. He stared at the other teen, who was shivering violently now.

"Can I warm you up?"

The alter flinched and didn't answer. He sat hunched over his knees, completely naked and obviously cold. Draco didn't push. He waited, knowing the alter was thinking it through. Finally, the green-eyed teen nodded, but he watched every move Draco made with narrowed and dangerous eyes. Draco cast the warming charm on his feet, legs, and hands. He couldn't get the alter's torso, seeing how the teen was huddled over the way he was.
"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked gently.

Rage and fear flashed across his face. "They hurt me. You hurt me?"

"I know they did," Draco soothed, fear clenching his muscles tight. Would Demon-Boy attack? "But I won't hurt you." He waited to see if this was accepted. After a second, the other teen nodded. Draco relaxed again. "Does it still hurt?"

"Always hurts."

Draco closed his eyes at this simple sentence. "I'm so sorry." He really was. It hurt him to hear that. He took a deep breath. Time for the hard questions. "Are you going to go kill those people who hurt you?"

"Kill them," the teen agreed, smiling a dark and happy smile.

"Now?" Draco pressed.

Demon-Boy's brow wrinkled, thinking for a minute before shaking his head. "No. Stay far away from them." The alter scowled ferociously, green eyes beginning to glow. "But I kill them if they come close! Kill them DEAD!"

Draco nodded, having no doubt that the alter was perfectly serious. "That's smart. Stay away from everyone, but stop them if they come after you again. Very smart."

The teen smiled happily at the compliment, reminding Draco of Boy, but his expression slowly turned haunted, the smile falling away as if it never was. "My skin breaks," the alter whispered, talking mostly to himself. "Whips and belts and knives and hands and spells. It hurts so much." He moaned, rocking backward and forward. "I try to be good. I even bring the belt when Uncle says. He makes me sharpen the knife and heat the stove, presses my skin onto the hot coils. I want to be good, so I do it, and then it hurts. The blisters, and the bruises, and the cuts... I got to keep them for a long time because Uncle gets mad when the marks go away too quick. But it hurts and I want to make it better. The masked men hurt me worse than Uncle. They break my bones; hurt me until I unravel and I have to pull myself together again and again, but they don't ever stop. Just like the man who touched me. He always forced me to help him hurt me. Just like Uncle; just like all of them. They force me to hurt so much!"

Draco bit his lip. He hated this, hated hearing what had been done to the one he loved. Worse, he knew Boy had been tortured for years without any help or relief. Six bloody years Vernon Dursley had his hands on Boy. The damnable Muggle knew the child would heal, so he became more and more violent. It gave him room to hurt the child without fear of discovery.

But Lockhart had done worse than Vernon. He made Boy's own body the weapon against him. Boy was raped and was made to think he liked it. It was the most devastating thing that anyone could have done to an already traumatized child.

Then Boy had been brutalized in the graveyard by sadistic, insane men using magic - the only thing that had ever helped Boy - in the cruelest ways possible to inflict as much agony as they could for almost two hours. That was an eternity when struggling with pain. Draco had witnessed what happened in the graveyard. Unraveled wasn't too far from the truth. It had been gruesome; worse even than anything he had seen Demon do to the people at the hospital.

"Dursley's gone," Draco rasped, praying he could give the alter some comfort. "He's dead and he'll never hurt you again. Lockhart - the man who touched you - He's dead, too. You killed some of the
masked men, as well. They won't hurt you ever again."

"Yes," Demon-Boy said with a chilling, insane laugh. "I killed them. I make sure they never hurt me again. I'll kill all of them who hurt me. I'll make them take the pain, give them all my pain, so I don't have to hurt no more."

Draco said nothing to this. What could he say? He wondered if this strange combination was permanent. He suspected it was. Draco had no idea how this had happened, but he was relieved. A raving werewolf and an out of control Demon weren't exactly manageable, but this he could work with. This he could handle.

"I can't keep thinking of you as Demon-Boy. What should I call you?" he asked himself.

"Call me?" the conflicted alter asked softly, eyes hooded and guarded. In the alter's experience, being called things was never a good feeling. Names like Freak, Boy, Bastard, Monster, Evil came instantly to mind. He glared hotly, poisonous green eyes narrowed in warning.

Draco didn't notice. "Well, you're not Boy anymore." And he was sincerely glad that the helpless and broken alter wasn't quite so helpless anymore. "You're strong and can defend yourself."

The teen smiled a demonic smile at that and relaxed minutely. Maybe he could let this other Boy call him something. Maybe it wouldn't be bad. The Boy obviously knew he would hurt him if he did anything he didn't like.


"Seraphim," the alter said slowly, eyes staring into Draco's. The name was not bad. It didn't mean anything hurtful, and the alter felt something warm and strange stir in his chest and stomach. His eyes opened wide with surprise in response. "… Seph…"

The expression the alter wore was one Draco knew very well from his Sundays with Boy. The child was still hungry for affection. It made Draco want to give him anything and everything he wanted or needed, made him want to shower the child with toys and hugs. Thankfully he had practice at restraining himself and managed to remain still in response to the beseeching look. He knew to do otherwise would only frighten the child and make him confused and uncomfortable.

The puppy-eyed look melted into a gorgeous and innocent smile. "Never be Boy or Freak again. No more hurting."

"No more hurt," Draco vowed, holding the joyful green eyes with his own. The promise connected them more fully than ever before.

"I am not Boy," the alter repeated, Demon echoing in his voice. "I am Seraphim."

"Hi, Seph. I'm Draco," the blond smiled.

"Draco? Not Boy?" Seph asked, instantly tense and suspicious.

"No. We're not going to be Boy ever again," Draco said, his eyes flashing silver.

Seph smiled, delighted, but it quickly turned into a large yawn.

Seeing an opportunity, Draco said, "Get some sleep. I'll keep watch and make sure no one comes."
Seph nodded, but darkness slid back into his gaze as he added, "Wake me up if people come. I'll make sure they don't hurt us."

"I will," Draco promised.

Seph curled up on the ground and closed his eyes. Draco waited a good five minutes, just to make sure Seph was truly sleeping, before moving forward and shaking the teen's shoulder. He prayed that it would be his friend who woke. The teen jerked awake, his eyes wide. Draco smiled when he saw one blue and one green eye.

"Shadow," he said on a sigh. Without thinking about it, he leaned forward and hugged his friend tight. The tension, the fear, the adrenaline of the night caught up to him and he began to shake. Tears burned his cheeks as they fell, but he was laughing. "Thank Merlin. Thank Merlin!"

"Draco?" Shadow rasped. He was deeply confused and very cold. He huddled into Draco's tight embrace, absorbing the blond's warmth and using the few minutes to gather his wits.

Draco pulled back and brushed the stiff, gore-spattered curls back away from Shadow's pale and drawn face. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you!"

Shadow blushed, his heart rate picking up as he stared into Draco's luminous grey eyes. "What happened? Where are we?" Only then realizing he was naked, he gasped and pulled his knees to his chest, covering himself as much as he could.

Draco blushed beet red, feeling even his ears heat up. "Oh, Merlin! I'm sorry!" He scrambled back a bit, but Shadow hardly noticed. He was beginning to go into shock.

"Why am I so sore?" Shadow demanded, wide-eyed. "And where'd all this blood come from? Where are my clothes?" He began to hyperventilate. He hated not being in control of himself!

"Okay. Calm down," Draco said quickly. He caught sight of Shadow's ring. "We can use that to get back to the house. I'll tell you everything while we get dressed and warmed up."

Shadow nodded. He found something sharp in the rubble and cut his finger, smearing his blood on the ring. Draco grabbed hold of his arm and Shadow activated the portkey. They arrived in his bedroom at home less than a minute later.

Omi appeared with a loud pop. "Young Master!" the elf cried, happily surprised. "Draco sir!"

"Can you make us something warm to eat?" Draco asked with a smile, mostly to get the elf out from under foot.

"Yes sir! Right away, sir!" the elf beamed happily and disappeared again.

Shadow was already in his closet, pulling on slacks and a plain white t-shirt. He grabbed a thick white sweatshirt for later and moved to the bathroom, determined to get the blood off. "What's going on, Draco?" he demanded.

"Can you make us something warm to eat?" Draco asked with a smile, mostly to get the elf out from under foot.

"Yes sir! Right away, sir!" the elf beamed happily and disappeared again.

Draco followed him. He sat at the edge of the tub as Shadow viciously scrubbed at his arms and washed his hair in the sink. He explained in a low voice everything that happened. Shadow listened, his face blank and grim. Draco's explanation came to an end long before Shadow was able to get clean.

Draco used the time to clean up himself and to change into some clothes Shadow said he could use. The two teens were very nearly the same size, Draco being only a little taller and bigger in the waist
and shoulders. After drying his face and hair, Shadow roughly pulled on his sweatshirt and moved downstairs. The smell of good hot food came floating up from the kitchen and made both teens’ stomachs growl.

"What are you going to do?" Draco asked worriedly. He didn’t like this closed and silent reaction at all.

"I don't know," Shadow answered dully, keeping his head down and his eyes elsewhere.

"Shadow, stop." Draco scowled and grabbed his friend by the arm, pulling him around. "Look at me. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours!"

With a glare, Shadow yanked his arm away. "What the hell do you think is going on in my fucked up head?"

Draco just stared back. "I have no idea."

"I can believe that." Shadow laughed bitterly and turned to continue on to the dining room. "Right now I need to eat. Then I'll summon Severus. After that… I don't know. We disappeared from the Grimmauld Place. I have no idea how to explain that away. You were seen at the hospital. You defended me. They'll think you were in on it and will probably put a price on your head. They might even be able to find out I was the freaky-ass dark creature that gruesomely murdered people and who could shoot multiple Killing Curses out of its fingers. An extermination squad will no doubt be after me."

His control snapping, Shadow spun around and got in the blond's face. "Not to mention I have no idea what the fuck to think about Boy and Demon now being merged. It doesn't exactly strike me as a good thing that more of myself is combined with an alter that was born of the bloody Dark Lord's Killing Curse! So what do you want me to say, Draco? That I'm all right? That we'll figure this out? That everything will be okay? Well, I can't fucking say any of that that!"

Draco grabbed his arm again when he turned to march away. He glared into the wild eyes of his friend. "I wanted you to say what you did; what you're really thinking. I'm not your enemy, Shadow. Nor do I need your reassurance. We're in this together. Don't forget that."

Shadow looked away, tears burning his eyes. "How can you still say that? After all you saw. After what you saw me do."

"Because," Draco answered simply, shrugging, "I just can. I can't explain it really. I know it wasn't you, but at the same time I know it was you in a way. I don't agree with the method, but Demon has every reason to hate Lockhart. Hell, even I swore to kill the bastard. Demon has good reason to hate people for what has been done to Boy. I can't blame him for what he did."

"And that woman and the two men who were sick?" Shadow sneered, self-hatred clear in his voice.

"You didn't do that on purpose, Shadow," Draco said softly, squeezing his arm to emphasize his point. "You can't help that sometimes you lash out after everything you've been through. It's a tragedy, but it wasn't your fault. All we can try to do is think of ways to prevent this from happening again. And we may not need to figure anything out anyway. Not with Boy tempering Demon. I told you he said he wasn't going to track more people down like Demon was doing. He's more into retreating to where there are no people." He smiled and tried to lighten the mood, saying, "Live and let live; that's not so bad, right?"

Shadow was shaken. He was out of control. He had killed more people, some innocent, but all
monstrously. Plus he had blown Grimmauld Place as a safe house. On top of that, he had put Draco in mortal danger... It was all too much to contemplate.

His head was spinning. Helplessness, anger, self-hate, and confusion warred with each other until he didn't know what he felt. He was afraid of himself and afraid of what would happen to him. Everything was falling apart, but Draco was still there. He said he wasn't leaving, and that added joy, surprise, and gratitude into the emotional hurricane tearing through him.

Biting his lip hard, he stepped up to Draco and pressed his face into the blond's shoulder. He felt Draco's arms come around him and he sighed, feeling the trembling in his muscles lessen. Slowly, he could breathe easier again. The violent tangle of emotions dissipated, leaving him feeling hungry, tired, and worried.

With a shock, he realized he was holding Draco just as tightly as the blond was holding him. His body was pressed against Draco's, and for one brief moment, he wished he could melt into him and disappear for awhile where it was safe. Blushing bright red, he pulled out of the embrace and hooked a few curls behind his ear nervously.

"We should hurry. The food's getting cold," he said lamely and hurried to the dinning room, eager to put some distance between them.

"Yeah. I'm starving," Draco answered with a smile, expertly denying the burning need to hold Shadow longer, to caress his face and kiss his hair, his eyes, his cheeks, his lips. It had taken all his self-control to let Shadow step out of his arms when all he wanted to do was prove they were both alive.

Swallowing hard and trying to think cold thoughts to kill his embarrassing reaction to having Shadow in his arms, he followed his love to the dinner table. They ate silently except for Shadow complimenting the elf on the food and his quickness. Omi fled from the praise in embarrassment, making the two teens laugh softly. When the meal was finished, Shadow found himself going to the parlor. As he moved he reached for his wrist and broke the summoning bracelet there for the third time that year while Draco sat next to him on the couch without a word.

They sat in silence. Shadow studied him surreptitiously. Draco's hair, now loose, naturally parted in the middle. His bangs were long enough to brush his cheeks and slightly concealed his eyes from view. He sat straight, his expression calm. He was paler than normal, but his hands were steady and his breathing was deep and regular. His eyes were a serene smoky grey, half-lidded with obvious fatigue.

Shadow was too cowardly to take a peek with his empathy. The way Shadow felt right now, even a slight rejection would kill him. He needed to believe in Draco's strong façade right now. He needed to believe that Draco's acceptance and understanding were real.

"It's taking too long," Draco spoke suddenly, making Shadow jump. "Severus should have responded by now."

Shadow frowned. He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had forgotten what they were waiting for. He looked at the clock on the mantle. Fifteen minutes had gone by. "Maybe he's held up with the Order," he offered thoughtfully. "Disappearing suddenly could be suspicious."

"Maybe," Draco muttered, unconvinced. He suspected that working on the cave was preventing them from contacting their teacher. Suddenly Bill being able to remove the monitoring anklet from Severus a few weeks ago didn't seem like a blessing. Had it still been in place, Severus would have been unable to help Sirius with the Horcrux and would be here now.
Shadow fidgeted with his shirt sleeves. He hadn't considered what to do if his father didn't come. It made him uncomfortable to realize how much he had come to depend on Severus to guide him. Did he really need the man to tell him what to do? Closing his eyes, he got a firm grip on his emotions and thoughts. It was time to think for himself again.

Draco frowned at his friend. He knew that look and wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. It was the same look Shadow wore when he asked for Draco's help with the Vetch poison intended for Dumbledore. It was the look he got when he was plotting against Umbridge and figuring out ways to manipulate the odds in his favor with the DA.

Shadow opened his eyes. "We need to know what's happening out there. We need to know what the Aurors know and if they're after us."

"The only way I can see to get information of that nature is to contact the Order."

Shadow shook his head. "We can't do that yet. Not until we know what's going on. They will want answers and I don't have any to give them." He ran his hands through his still damp curls and began to pace in front of the blond. "So we have no way right now of finding out about the Aurors, and we can't risk trying to contact Nev or Remus in case the Order intercepts the message..." Shadow paused, an idea coming to him. "But we can find out about what's going on in my freaky ass head."

"You're not a freak, Shadow," Draco growled warningly.

Shadow rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. Come on." The teen hurried from the room, moving toward the front door.

"Where are we going?" Draco asked, following close on his heels.

Shadow looked back at him, a wry smile twisting his lips, and then he looked off to the side. "Omi!"

The elf appeared instantly. "Yes, young Master?"

"If Severus or anyone else arrives looking for us, tell them we went to Hogwarts."

Draco's eyes went wide with understanding.

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Neville's head hurt so badly that he thought for sure it was going to split open. He shifted and moaned, hoping he could find a position that would ease the sharp agony in his temples. It was the wrong thing to do as a wave of nausea rolled through his stomach. He had to desperately swallow to keep from heaving. As the pain faded a bit, he realized he was breathing through clenched teeth, making a soft whistling sound that scraped at his raw nerves. He immediately stopped.

A door opened and shut softly, but to him it sounded like a small explosion. He whimpered, tears spilling from his tightly clenched eyes. Someone hurried to his side and he felt a gentle wave of magic that dulled the pain to merely severe. A cool potion at his lips dulled it further, so that he could crack open an eye without passing out.

"Better?" Remus asked very softly. He was crouched by the sofa Neville was laying on and gently carding a hand through the teen's sweat-soaked hair.

"Wha... appened?" Neville asked weakly.

"You got sick. Someone broke in using Dark magic and the backwash sent you into magical shock,"
Remus explained, his amber eyes looking intensely into Neville's, trying to impart a message.

The Gryffindor frowned, but then he sat bolt upright. The sudden move to vertical had him vomiting over the side of the couch. Remus seemed to have predicted the move because he already had a bucket. He gently stroked Neville's shoulders and back until the spasms stopped and Neville lay back again with a groan.

"Don't move," Remus scolded, setting the bucket to the side. Thankfully, the contents immediately vanished away, clearing the air a bit of the pervasive acrid smell.

"Shadow?" the teen croaked. He reached a pale and shaking hand out to Remus and gripped his wrist. "Gone?"

"Yes. He and Draco were both taken. We're looking for them now." Remus lifted a rag from the end table by Neville's head. One charm later and it was damp with cool water. He gently wiped at the teen's sweaty face. "Rest. I'll tell you as soon as we find them."

Neville closed his eyes, his thoughts whirling. Demon must have come Out. He had no idea why, but it explained why he was so sick. He had only ever followed the trail of Dark magic that Demon left in his wake, and even that made him feel slightly ill. The only time he had been close when Demon was active was the night in third year when Demon went berserk against the Dementors.

He had been all the way out by the lake and Neville had been up in Gryffindor Tower and still Neville had ended up in the Infirmary. This time he had been lying right next to the alter. No wonder he felt like he was dying, but he couldn't worry about that now. Shadow was missing; who knew what could have happened to him!

He vividly remembered coming upon Shadow in the Dursleys' house after Demon had finished reaping his vengeance. His brother had been blood-spattered and deeply in shock. What if he was that way now? He might be lost or afraid. Neville knew he might be the only one who could find him, but even thinking about using his Earth magic made him want to sick up again. He gritted his teeth, sending spikes of pain through his skull.

"Nev, rest. I promise we'll find Shadow," Remus murmured, bringing the cloth over Neville's forehead and eyes. He bent closer, his mouth close to Neville's ear, and whispered softly, "Demon went to St. Mungo's last night. Lockhart and a few other people are dead. Draco activated Demon's Animagus form, so no one knows it was Shadow. The Ministry thinks it was a random Dark creature while the Order thinks it was sent by the Dark Lord as a test of its abilities. Aurors believe Draco was helping the creature and the Ministry has issued a warrant for his arrest. The Order is trying to find Draco before the Aurors do, so that they can ask questions and perhaps protect him from the Ministry. I was able to slip over to the house and Omi said Draco and Shadow are healthy. They rested and ate before heading back to Hogwarts. They're safe for now. Severus and Sirius are out of reach, working on the project at the cave, but as soon as I get a hold of them, I'll tell them to head to the school. Don't worry, cub. We'll figure this out."

Neville groaned. "My parents?"

"Safe. They weren't hurt," Remus reassured. "Rest, Nev. Seriously. You took a big shock to your system. You need to sleep some more."

Neville didn't want to. He wanted to get up and go to his brother, goddamn it! But his consciousness began to grey out. His hands twitched with a final effort to stay awake, then he passed out once more.
Fred and George looked both ways down the hallway. The coast was clear. Fred hurried forward and walked boldly into the strategy room, ready with a joke if someone was in there, but it was empty except for a large oval table with about ten chairs around it. It was covered in three dimensional magical maps while timelines were posted on the walls.

He quickly signaled his twin, and George slipped silently into the room, shutting the door behind him. He stayed there, listening and watching. He'd whistle if someone approached. Fred hurried over to the potted plant in the corner. He gently unwrapped a small microphone, a Muggle bug, from the base of the trunk near the dirt and uncovered the recording device buried deeper.

It took about a minute, then he banished the dirt that he spilled on the carpet and hurried to his brother's side. They were good to go. Silently, the twins hurried back down the hall, leaving no evidence of their presence. A few minutes later they were up in their room, the door warded and locked.

"Let's see if we finally got something," Fred said with an excited grin, rubbing his hands together. "Hopefully there isn't static this time."

George nodded and carefully rewound the tape in the device. It had taken them a few days to figure out how to work the Muggle equipment and then several months to try and make it magic proof. Hopefully, this time they had succeeded. They had been developing subtle and complex warding just for the occasion and were running out of ideas on how to make this work.

A click sounded and George looked up at his brother, took a deep breath, and pushed play. It worked! After a small section of silence, the recorder played for them the meeting that took place a few hours ago. They listened to Charlie describe the stats on the creature they had managed to put together. Unfortunately, the Dark magic residue was so strong that it interfered with surveillance spells, preventing them from seeing what happened. All they had to go on was what the Aurors and Healers had seen, and they hadn't seen much.

A lot of stuff was said about the defenses of Grimmauld Place and cleaning out any and all Dark magic. The Triad had examined all of headquarters thoroughly. The Fidelius Charm was still in place, but there was still a lot of argument about whether they should abandon the safe house. In the end, it was decided that Grimmauld Place was secure enough. The spell that abducted the boys probably took them without giving away their location.

Next, there was discussion about how to find Draco and Shadow, as well as ways to make sure the Aurors wouldn't find the boys before the Order. Most of the suggestions were long-shots and dismissed out of hand.

Listening to the intense and inevitably futile discussion between the supposedly talented and capable adults was hilarious! Fred was laughing his ass off. George just sat with a large satisfied grin on his face. This was great! Their wards finally worked! They now had an undetectable way of spying on the Order.

George fast-forwarded over a long silent gap and then stopped it as they heard muttering. It sounded like Moody. Fred frowned and turned it up, but they still couldn't make out what the ex-Auror was saying. George fast forwarded a bit more, but quickly stopped when he thought he heard the door open again.

"Mad-Eye," Tonks' voice sounded over the small speaker. "Anything I can do to help?"
"Aren't you supposed to be at the Ministry?" the ex-Auror growled.

"They're in a state of emergency. All Apprentices are to remain at home until further notice," Tonks said, sounding like she was quoting something. "Any new information?"

Moody growled in frustration. "First that bloody snake that attacked Arthur gets away and now this! We checked all over St. Mungo's. We can't figure out how that creature got into the sealed ward. Apparating should be impossible there, just like here. If the bloody creature can bypass wards, it's a powerful weapon. We need to find it and remove it."

There was the sound of cloth moving, then Tonks' voice, closer now, said, "Why is Godric's Hollow in red?"

"We found the same magical signature there that was left in St. Mungo's and here," Moody answered stiffly. "Perhaps the Dark Lord's still looking for Potter? Who knows."

Fred and George met each other's eyes as the sound of Moody stomp-limping around the room came over the small speaker. They had their own suspicions about why the creature would retreat to Godric's Hollow, but they weren't about to tell Moody that.

"I hope the boys are okay," Tonks murmured.

"There's something not right here," Moody barked suddenly, making the twins jump.

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked, bewilderment in her voice.

"If the Death Eaters summoned the Malfoy boy to St. Mungo's hoping the creature would tear him apart, why did the boy defend the creature from the Aurors and lock the Healer's out of the room and himself in? Why didn't he try to run?"

"I don't know."

There was a slight pause and then Moody said in a low, grim voice. "I think Malfoy knew the creature somehow. Why else protect it?"

"How would he?"

"Don't you find it suspicious that Snape and Malfoy disappear at the same time in a wave of magic so Dark it has never been seen before, and then Malfoy reappears at St. Mungo's in the company of an unknown Dark creature?"

Another pause, longer this time. George's heart rate picked up and he growled. Fred smiled a bloodthirsty grin. He didn't like where the man was going with this, either.

"You mean… You think that creature… was Shadow?"

"Think about it. It makes sense! That boy grew up hidden. Why? Just to keep him safe from Death Eaters? That level of absolute isolation and secrecy seems a bit extreme. That creature's like nothing we've ever seen before. It's not natural. It was created. Maybe the Death Eaters did something to him when his mother and sister were attacked when he was a baby. Snape wouldn't have reported it. He would want to protect his son from the Dark creature regulation laws. It all makes sense! I knew there was something suspicious about that boy."

"I don't know, Mad-Eye," Tonks said unhappily. "If he were a Dark creature, what made him change? Why hadn't he changed before now?"
"Snape probably just recently figured out a way to suppress the change with his potions," Moody growled, impatient. "Think, woman. Why did Snape bring his son out of hiding now when he was in more danger than ever before? Why not keep him hidden? No one knew the boy existed! Bringing him out now is illogical."

"Then if Severus found a cure…"

"Not a cure; a suppressant. It wore off or maybe because we kicked him out he wasn't able to give his son his next dose. Either way, the boy changed into that thing. That's why Malfoy protected the creature. He knew it was his best friend. We find the boy, we find that creature."

"You want to kill him? He's just a boy, Mad-Eye!"

"He's also a murderous, highly dangerous, Dark creature." The sound of him stomping across the room echoed through the speaker. "Look at this magic output! All of it the blackest magic we've ever seen."

Tonks didn't answer.

"You want to be an Auror? You want to be an asset to this Order and not just a tolerated joke? Then you'd better be ready to do what needs to be done."

"… I understand we have to stop the creature," Tonks answered, her voice shaky. "I just don't think it's Shadow."

"But if it is?" the ex-Auror asked in a low voice.

"Then… I guess we still have to stop it."

The tape clicked off, coming to its end. Fred and George stared at each other. Both of them were thinking of the details they had read off that stats page posted on the wall in the strategy room. The sheer level of Dark magic the creature left in its wake, the way the creature mutilated and tortured the people in the hospital ward, the way it effortlessly and wandlessly struck down two people with Killing Curses; none of it was something to take lightly. This was serious. Very, very serious.

George said carefully, "We need to find Shadow."

"He was definitely the creature," Fred said, eyeing his twin.

"I'm still going to help him."

Fred shrugged. "Okay."

"But not before we do something to slow down Mad-Eye," George said, arching his eyebrow suggestively.

Fred grinned, eyes shining with mischief. "Sounds brilliant."

xXx

Shadow opened his eyes slowly. He was cradled by his chair, curled up to keep warm against the biting winter cold that seeped into the Chamber of Secrets. He yawned, feeling like his head was filled with cotton. His stomach rumbled; hunger was gnawing at his belly. They hadn't felt like they could call on the Hogwarts elves to cook for them, afraid that they would report to the Headmistress that they were somewhere in the school.
"Draco?" he asked, looking over at the sofa chair next to his.

The blond was sitting there, tipped a bit to the side, still sound asleep. His mouth was partly open and soft blond strands fell across his eyes. Shadow smiled, his cheeks warming. Alone, he felt safe to acknowledge the confusing and frightening feelings Draco stirred in him. He reached over and gently brushed the blond hair back. Draco's cheek was soft, the warmth of it deeply comforting. The sound of his deep breathing was so peaceful, Shadow felt like he could fall right back to sleep listening to it.

"Draco," he called more loudly, pulling back his hand.

The blond opened his eyes and sat up. He rubbed at his face and then met Shadow's gaze, alert. "Is Salazar done?"

"Yeah," Shadow guessed, otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed to wake. "Salazar! Come on! We're waiting."

The phantom materialized before them. His usual scowl was missing. He looked contemplative and was even now looking at Shadow as if he could see right into his mind. Draco sat up straighter, his heart kicking up a bit, while Shadow sneered and crossed his arms defensively against the invasive look.

"Well?" he demanded, arching an eyebrow.

"I don't know where to start," Salazar admitted, still staring unblinkingly at the teen. "I've never seen anything like this before. Your condition truly is remarkable."

"Start at the beginning," Draco said icily. "Is this permanent?"

"Yes." Salazar nodded and finally looked away to glance at Draco. "And I agree with you. This is a good thing, considering."

"Considering what?" Shadow scowled. "Spit it out, damn it!"

The phantom met his hot glare with a cool one of his own. "I didn't consider it before because I was not familiar with the Crux Horridis Ritual. I thought Demon was just the energy of the Killing Curse adopting a personality from the dark emotions - hate and anger - you siphoned to him over the years, but now I believe he already had a personality template.

"I think Demon was an incomplete Horcrux. Voldemort didn't have time to finish it, the ritual was interrupted, but I believe your death would have been significant enough for him to try and create a seventh Horcrux. Seven is the number of completion after all. Killing the only child who could kill him would have been the perfect seventh Horcrux, the final step to complete immortality."

Shadow paled and leaned back in the chair. Had he been standing, he knew he would have fallen, his legs giving out under him. He understood Ginny's fear better now. Knowing Voldemort's soul was inside him… It was revolting.

"I believe that your hate and anger built on the faint personality imprint already placed on the energy of the Killing Curse," Salazar continued, uncaring about the distress his information was creating. "In essence, I now believe that Demon was always a foreign spirit possessing you, but by linking to Boy - his opposite - Demon became attached to you."

Shadow groaned; he felt like he was about to be sick.
"It's a good thing actually," Salazar admonished. He rolled his eyes. "If you had not created an alter that was his opposite, Demon would not have been attached to you. As soon as the mental link you share with Voldemort opened, Demon would have transferred back to his rightful host. You were making Demon stronger by feeding him your hate and anger growing up. Voldemort would have doubled his already exceptional strength."

"So what does it mean now that the two merged?" Draco asked faintly. He stared at his best friend's stricken face and was hyperaware that he was the reason Boy and Demon were now inseparably one.

The phantom looked at him, enthusiasm lighting in his eyes. "Demon reacted to the Killing Curse because he was still Voldemort's as much as Shadow's. It stimulated and reminded Demon of his original essence, so to speak, and gave him the strength to overpower Shadow's mind, letting him fully possess Shadow's body if he so chose, but now that he has merged with Boy, Seraphim, as you named him, is wholly Shadow's without doubt."

"Why is this a good thing?" Shadow demanded, hands trembling and bile burning his throat.

"Because," Salazar sneered, unimpressed with the teen's intelligence, "that means Voldemort can't take Seraphim from you by simply calling for him. Had the Dark Lord known what was really going on, he could have easily devastated your power and possessed all of Demon's strength whenever he wanted. Now he can't. It's too late. Demon no longer exists. Seraphim is yours. He is cleansed of Voldemort's personality and instincts. Now he is shaped solely by the experiences he endured as both Demon and Boy, as well as the emotions you imbued both alters with."

"Great," Shadow said sarcastically. "Why didn't we do this sooner?"

Salazar decided to ignore him. "Seraphim is very powerful. He holds complete control over your very unique healing ability, as well as remembering how to access the Dark Plane, which is the source of all Dark magic. On top of this, he is still inarguably insane. I recommend a continuation of therapy, as well as beginning exercises that will help you ease some of this magic into your conscious control and out of Seraphim's mental arena."

Draco saw that Shadow couldn't handle this right now. His expression was completely closed off and his eyes were glassy. He needed time to think about all this and absorb the information. More importantly, he needed time to consider the far-reaching consequences of all of this. So Draco stood and got the phantom's attention.

"Thank you. We'll think about it. Unfortunately, we have to leave before someone finds us here. We're kind of hot items right now. We'll come back when we can."

Salazar nodded, his monkey-like face breaking into a smile. "That's fine. I need to consider the shape of the therapy. It's not going to be as easy as it was with Boy. For one thing, we are no longer dealing with an alter with the mentality of a child."

Draco nodded and the phantom faded away. He moved to Shadow's side and pulled him out of the chair.

Stiffly, Shadow cut his thumb and smeared the blood on his portkey ring. Then they were being sucked through and dropped carelessly on the floor of his bedroom. "I'm going to go for a run," he murmured before rushing from the room.

Draco followed long enough to see Shadow throw open the front door, turn into his lynx form, and dart off into the afternoon. He sighed, worry shrouding him like a cloak. "Where are you Severus?"
he asked the empty house. "Now's not the time to disappear."

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"How is Neville?" Tonks asked softly, looking into the sitting room behind the man.

Remus smiled, dark circles lining his eyes as he pulled the door shut behind him. "Better. He's resting more easily."

"That's good," Tonks smiled up into his eyes, her own eyes changing color to match his. "Can we talk? I need to speak to you."

Remus nodded and led her toward the kitchen. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon. Molly wouldn't come for another hour yet to prepare dinner. He put a tea pot on the stove and looked at her invitingly. "What do you need to talk about?"

Tonks came up beside him, her hair turning mousy brown. "It's like you said. Mad-Eye is stirring discord. Yesterday he tried to convince me that we need to find Shadow and kill him. He's not looking for the creature any longer, he's looking for Shadow, and I'm afraid of what will happen when Mad-Eye finds him."

Remus felt a cold murderous intent grip him. "What do you think?" he asked softly, keeping his eyes averted, knowing she'd see the monster within him if he let her see his face now.

"I… I think he might be right. That Shadow somehow was turned into that creature, but that is no reason to hurt him," Tonks said firmly, her hair turning red with temper as she grabbed her crush's shoulders and turned him around. She matched his golden gaze. "I think I've come to know you well enough by now, Remus. You know more than you're letting on. Even if Shadow were the creature, all I really need to know is that you love him. If Shadow was a true threat, you wouldn't feel that way. He can still be saved."

Remus looked at her, surprised. "You trust me? What if the Order told you it needed to be done? What if the Ministry told you they'd sack you from your Apprenticeship? You saw what the creature did at St. Mungo's."

"I wouldn't want to be a part of any group that would order me to hurt a kid who could be helped," Tonks said seriously.

Remus felt his muscles relax and reached up to brush her hair away from her cheeks, feeling heat pool in his stomach. "Thank you, Dora."

Tonks went red, her hair turning pink with happiness and embarrassment while her eyes turned a sparkling sky blue. She leaned in, feeling giddy with accomplishment. She had finally broken through a few of the stubborn man's barriers. Adjusting her height, she captured his mouth with her own. He responded instantly. His hotter than normal body temperature soaked into her as he shoved her against the counter and attacked her mouth with his delicious tongue.

"Ahem!" Molly cleared her throat, her eyes twinkling with amusement as the two supposed adults separated with red faces. "I have a dinner to start and the Christmas meal to begin to prepare for. I hardly think everyone will appreciate it if I tell them they can go hungry because someone thought the kitchen was a bedroom!"

Remus bowed. "Of course, Molly. Excuse us."

Tonks took his hand and they left the room together laughing.
Neville waited impatiently for the floo to flare green and his grandmother to escort him home. Remus insisted he wasn't well enough to floo by himself, so Ginny was waiting with him. Ron and Hermione were there as well, but they were merely trying to work themselves up to questioning him about Shadow's whereabouts. He knew Ginny suspected he was up to something, but she hadn't asked and he hadn't told her what he was planning. He felt mildly guilty about it, but not enough to make him regret his silence. Remus had told him last night that there was an unknown quantity of the Order willing to kill Shadow. He didn't want it to get around that he wasn't going where he was saying he was going.

"Did the Death Eaters really take Shadow?" Hermione finally spoke up. She looked pale and frightened. Ron didn't look much better. "Maybe we should tell the Headmistress…"

"No," Neville interrupted coldly. "It wouldn't make them look for Shadow any harder than they already are. Besides, the oath won't allow it."

"But you aren't bound, are you, mate?" Ron asked pointedly. "Look, Neville, he's in trouble. He needs all the help he can get! You said yourself he wouldn't survive something like that again!"

"Then it's already too late. They'll find him or they won't," Neville said, his voice trembling despite knowing Shadow was really okay. "The Order knowing would only hinder Shadow if he has managed to stay alive or even escape. Trust me."

Ron and Hermione were obviously unhappy with his final stance, but they couldn't argue with him anymore. McGonagall had stepped into the room with Remus and Tonks at her side.

"I hope you recover soon, Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said warmly. "I'm sorry we did not protect you better."

"I'll be fine, ma'am." Neville smiled at her. He was certain that she would never agree to kill Shadow. Neither would Charlie, but Shacklebolt was a mystery.

The fire flared green and Augusta Longbottom stepped into the room. She stood tall and regal, the vulture hat thankfully missing from her head. She nodded at McGonagall but ignored everyone else in the room as she gestured Neville closer for the floo back. Neville said a quick goodbye to everyone and moved to his grandmother's side. He disappeared in a flare of green, his mind already on other things.

He barely paused as he stepped out of the hearth at home and moved toward the backyard. Uncle Algie watched him go without comment, but Augusta followed after her grandson closely. Neville sat on the ground and took a deep breath in preparation of entering a meditative state and manipulating his Earth magic.

"Be careful, boy," Augusta said, her proud face softening into a smile.

"I will," Neville answered, his voice already distant.

Thirty minutes later, a healthy young oak rose up out of the snowy ground. Its green leaves cast a shadow over the back door to the house. Augusta looked up through the branches; the weak winter sunlight dappled across her face. Uncle Algie came up behind her and put a wrinkled hand on her shoulder. Augusta turned to him and they made their way back inside, pride unmistakable on both of their faces.
Neville discovered that his Earth magic was still raw, even two and a half days since Demon's disappearance. The magic came close to overwhelming him, reminding him of the times when he came close to losing his humanity to it. It was about all he could manage to feel for the tree he had left and birthed in the clearing near Snape House. If it didn't already call to him, he would never have made it so far intact.

Reversing the Animagus Transformation, Neville stumbled forward, falling to his hands and knees in the snow. Gasping, he shook, readjusting to the sense of human arms and legs, breathing lungs. It took a good ten minutes before he had the strength and coordination to stand. His feet and hands were frozen through, but he managed to make his way to the dilapidated house on the hill, only falling four times. He was just about to reach for the door when something crashed into his back. Neville fell sideways, crying out and raising his arms to fend off another attack.

The lynx sitting on his stomach gave a huff of laughter and bent forward, licking Neville's face from chin to forehead.

"Shadow!" Neville laughed, delighted to see his brother okay and in good humor. Remus had told him so, but Neville hadn't really believed it. Reaching up, he hugged the cat gently. The warm, thick fur smelled like clean snow.

The front door opened and Draco stepped out, almost tripping over the two of them. He scowled, his blond hair blowing across his face as a breeze sped by. He held a steaming plate of meat in one hand. "What are you doing down there?" the Slytherin said with a sneer. "Why don't we move this inside before a Muggle sees us?"

Neville clambered to his feet, his teeth chattering violently with the cold. Shadow trotted in on silent cat paws while Draco shut the door behind them. The warmth of the house was very welcome and the three of them made their way to the dining room, Shadow transforming back into his human form as they went.

They picked at their food as they told each other what had been happening. Neville was shocked to learn that the Demon he knew was no more. He was further upset when it was explained that all along Demon had really been a soul-shard of Voldemort. Draco was more interested in talking about the Order. Neville couldn't tell them much besides what Remus and the twins had told him, but it was enough to have the blond scowling.

"So," Shadow said with a tired sigh. "I was right. The Order can't be trusted."

"Salazar did say that Demon… I mean, Seraphim… isn't a Horcrux anymore?" Neville questioned. "That's a good thing, right?"

"Severus is out of reach at that stupid cave." Draco crossed his arms, his lips curled in annoyance. "It's very inconvenient to say the least!"

"I'm not sure we want to interrupt them. It might distract them and get them killed. They're dealing with some pretty Dark stuff. Besides, I think we can manage without him for a few days," Shadow added, flicking his fingers in a show of indifference. Both Draco and Neville saw straight through the act and to the worry that really lay under the casual words, but wisely neither remarked on it.

"So what's the plan?" Neville asked them, looking back and forth between the two Slytherins as Shadow and Draco shared a glance.
"To be honest," Shadow admitted, looking back at his brother. "We haven't really come up with anything yet… I've had a lot to think about."

"While hiding outside in your Animagus form, you mean?" Draco asked sweetly.

"Shut up," Shadow muttered, blushing.

Neville shook his head at them. "Well, I'm sure we'll think of something."

Chapter end.
The Department of Mysteries

In the end, the boys decided that it was best to wait. There was really nothing else they could do. They didn't have an explanation about what took place at St Mungo's or a plausible story about their disappearance from Grimmauld Place. To be more precise, they didn't have any way to back up any story they could create. For that, they would need Severus' help. So they decided to stay at Snape House until the Potions Master and Sirius returned from trying to remove the Horcrux from the cave.

They spent the rest of the day playing games, talking, and distracting each other from the passage of time and the enemies lurking outside. They played chess and Exploding Snap and cooked marshmallows in the fireplace. The last was Neville's idea when he discovered that both Shadow and Draco had never done so before.

Thursday dawned and it looked to be a cold, dreary day. By noon, the thick grey clouds released a small blizzard of snow, and the teens took shelter inside. It was almost peaceful until Omi popped into the room and announced an owl had delivered a message. The letter the little elf handed over was from Narcissa.

Draco snatched the thick parchment and quickly read the short message.

Shadow took the letter from the blond's nerveless fingers as Draco stood there, pale-faced and wide-eyed.

_I must be quick, my dearest son. My husband's plans progress rapidly. He and his closest friends will follow their leader to the Ministry, which will conveniently be shut down and closed at five o'clock on the eve of Christmas. I have heard gossip to indicate a plan to steal something of great value therein. To further protect this venture, the rest of your father's associates will provide a worthy distraction. If one venture succeeds, your father's leader will be greatly empowered. If both succeed, I fear you will have chosen the wrong side._

_Be smart and safe, my Dragon,_

_Your loving Mother_

"The Death Eaters move Christmas Eve," Shadow said quietly, answering his brother's questioning look.

"The Inner Circle will try and steal the prophecy with the Dark Lord, while the rest of the Death Eaters create a distraction," Draco elaborated. He had shaken off his shock and his eyes blazed with purpose. "We can't let this happen."

"No. We can't," Shadow agreed. He handed the letter back to Draco. "Neville. Contact your grandmother. Tell her that the Death Eaters move Christmas Eve, but tell her nothing about the Department of Mysteries."

"Why? The Order needs to be there to defend it!" Neville exclaimed.

"We can't have them there," Shadow countered, his tone gentle and coaxing. "You know what has to be done. I have to destroy this thing once and for all. Only Tom or I can touch it safely. I'm going as soon as the Ministry shuts down and I'm going to get rid of it. No one will be there to see me and I don't think Tom will show up there that early. I'll be in and out before anyone's the wiser."
Neville looked horrified with this plan. "But…!"

"You'll need help," Draco cut the Gryffindor off. He held Shadow's gaze. "I'm going."

"How do you expect to get in?" Neville protested, shooting the blond an annoyed glance. "There will be alarms and wards all over the place. Just because no one will be there physically doesn't mean you'll be able to get in unnoticed. And if you destroy that prophecy, they'll know Harry Potter was there!"

"So let them know that." Shadow shrugged. "I don't care as long as they don't find out that Harry Potter and Shadow Snape are one and the same. And they won't know that because no one will be there to see me and I'll go in as a lynx."

"And I have a special talent with locks." Draco smiled, eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"What about the wards?" Neville insisted, a bit desperately, knowing he was fighting a losing battle.

Shadow thought about that and just when Neville thought he had finally made his point about the whole thing being too dangerous, the two-colored eyes lit up with triumph. "Bring the twins here. They are good with wards, they'll be able to help us."

Neville crossed his arms, his dark brown eyes unhappy. He planted his feet and squared his shoulders, immovable. "If you're going to do this, I'm coming, too. You'll need all the help you can get."

Shadow frowned but nodded. "Fine, but don't tell Remus. He'll try to stop us. He might even tell the Order in an attempt to protect us."

"He wouldn't," Neville protested.

"Are you with us or not, Longbottom?" Draco demanded, his face set in hard lines.

"I'm with you." Neville rolled his eyes. "I don't think it's necessary, but I won't tell Remus."

"Then you and the twins should meet us at the public Ministry access instead of here. I don't want anyone to know about this house unless it's unavoidable," Shadow decided.

"Meet us at four thirty," Draco added. "We can slip in before the Ministry closes and hide until everyone is gone. That will make it easier to get to the Department of Mysteries without being detected. We'll still have locks and wards to deal with, but the strongest ones should be on the entrances."

"Good idea." Shadow grinned. "You should go now, Nev. I don't want anyone to notice you talking to the twins, so you need time to wait for the right moment. Meet us tomorrow at four o'clock. We'll get some goodies ready here."

Neville nodded reluctantly. He still had a bad feeling about this, but he agreed that the Dark Lord couldn't be allowed to get the prophecy.

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The Order Triad stood at the head of the table in the strategy room. They looked grim-faced and determined. Just fifteen minutes ago, they had been alerted that the Aurors guarding Azkaban were under attack. Charlie leaned over a map of Azkaban, sprawled out over the table. All eyes were on him.
"We need to move fast. Kill as many Death Eaters as possible. Try to capture some alive to be questioned later. Incapacitate any prisoners or Auror members. Try not to be seen. Keep your hoods spelled up and make sure the golden phoenix pin is clear on your chest. You don't want to be mistaken for a Death Eater and hit with friendly fire.

"Mad-Eye," he snapped, eyes flashing over to the ex-Auror. "You'll lead a team of seven to infiltrate the west entrance. Lupin, take five to hold the exit. Minerva," he gestured to his left, "will take another seven in through the South entrance while Kingsley," he tipped his head to his right, "and Emmeline take their teams to guard her back. This will be where the Aurors will focus their energy, so be extra careful."

Vance nodded, her face determined and her hands steady.

"I'll be here," Charlie continued, "watching the action through the scrying bowl. I'll contact you through the phoenix pins if something goes wrong or to warn you of incoming attacks as much as I can."

He looked around at the fifty Order members crammed into the room. He could still see fear in the younger faces. The older faces looked just as worried, but none of them were backing down. They had been preparing for almost seven months for this, ever since the Triwizard Tournament ended that summer.

"We can't let the Death Eaters win," Charlie said with absolute finality. "It will swell the Dark Lord's ranks with insane criminals. They will be unpredictable and devastating in their attacks. It will also win the Dark Lord the Dementors. The creatures are only loyal to those that can dominate them. We won the last war against them, so they serve the Ministry. If the Dark Lord proves his strength, they will follow him just as obediently. Your victory is essential. Don't hesitate. Move quickly and come back safe."

A cheer went up and the team leaders quickly organized their groups and set out for battle.

Fred and George pulled their Extendable Ears away from the door. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione chased after them.

"You two have been acting shifty all day!" Ron exclaimed, pushing into the twins' room. "How did you know there was going to be an attack?"

"We're special like that," Fred said mockingly. He tried to get his brother to leave, but Ron was being stubborn. It was almost four fifteen. They didn't have time for this. They were supposed to floo to Neville's ten minutes ago but had gotten distracted by the arrival of almost the whole Order, which was something that had never happened before.

"What's in those bags?" Hermione asked suspiciously, pointing to the two backpacks filled with supplies and jokes.

"What's going on?" Ginny demanded. "Is this about what Neville told you yesterday? I saw him pull you up here and then lock the door!"

"This is about Harry!" Ron accused. "Tell us! We have a right to know!"

"We promised to help him!" Hermione pleaded. "If we can't help, we'll stay here, but if he's doing something heroically stupid again, he's going to need us!"

"We can't tell the Order, he made sure of that," Ginny scowled, crossing her arms under her breasts. "So you have to let us help in their stead."
Fred and George exchanged a glance. They couldn't really leave them here now. They could tell somebody. The best plan would be to floo them all over to Neville's and let him decide. They could Stupefy them or something and leave them there where they couldn't cause trouble. Decided, the twins began to grin.

Ron and the girls looked nervous at the expression, but none of them backed down.

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Shadow and Draco waited across the street from the broken public phone. They both wore jeans and heavy jackets to keep warm against the late December cold. They blended in seamlessly with the London Muggles. The sky was cuttingly clear, and the sun was sinking slowly toward the horizon. In about an hour, it would be dark.

"What time is it?" Draco muttered, scowling from under the small bill of the beanie hat he wore. His blond hair was too remarkable, so Shadow had insisted that he wear it.

"Almost five," Shadow answered, his eyes searching the street. Neville and the twins were supposed to floo to the Leaky Cauldron and then take a Muggle taxi to their position. What was taking so long? "We might have to go without them."

Just then a taxi pulled up and Shadow released a nervous breath as he saw Neville and then the twins exit. He sucked it right back in, however, when he saw Ron, Hermione, and Ginny following them.

"Bloody hell," Draco breathed, coldly furious.

Neville hurried over, looking ashamed. "They insisted," he said quickly. "I thought it would be better if they came. That way they couldn't tell anyone. Besides, it might be good to have a few more wands at our backs."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, eyes blazing at the shrinking Gryffindor.

"Later," Shadow snapped. "We don't have time for this." He shot an annoyed glance at his brother, but quickly moved on. "We'll go in three groups. You, me, and Draco under my invisibility cloak, the twins under theirs, and hopefully they'll have something to give the others. We'll hide in the Entrance Hall among the pillars as planned."

Neville nodded and gestured the others over. The twins had been holding them back from rushing over. Hermione was the first to arrive and she flung her arms around Shadow's neck. Shadow endured it for a moment, but then he shrugged her off. He quickly relayed the plan to the twins and then flung the cloak over Draco and Neville's heads, disappearing with them.

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Draco and Neville stood close to each other under Shadow's invisibility cloak, while Shadow sat still between them as a lynx. They watched silently as the cheerful and oblivious Ministry employees left for their two days off. It took a good half hour before the last person disappeared in the fire and the hearths went dead.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Neville whispered nervously.

"I'm sure we'll figure something out," Draco answered with a sneer, throwing off the cloak.

Quickly rolling it up, he shoved it into the backpack he carried. He moved forward after the lynx form of Shadow. As they passed the statue of Magical Brethren, a second cloak was pulled off,
revealing Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. The three of them fell into step behind Draco and a nervous Neville. Fifty paces later, the twins shimmered into view beside the abandoned security table after removing the disillusionment charms they had used.

Shadow stopped at the table and looked suspiciously at the grey and white-spotted owl perched on the back of the chair that the security guard would have used, had he been there. Whiskers twitching, Shadow flicked his tufted ears and mewed questioningly. The twins shared a glance and lifted their wands at the small, ruffled owl.

"It's just an owl," Ron said impatiently, his blue eyes darting all over the vast and empty hall. The place was giving him the creeps!

The owl turned its head almost fully upside down and hooted.

"It could be an Animagus," Hermione hissed to the clueless redhead, also lifting her wand.

"Show yourself!" Ginny demanded.

The owl obediently flew to the end of the table, making Shadow jump back with a startled hiss. There was a blurring of the creature's edges and, within seconds, Luna sat on the table, kicking her feet and smiling brightly.

"Lovegood!" Draco snapped, glaring hotly. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard the shadows whispering of a treasure hunt when everyone else left. I wanted to play, so I stayed behind," she answered innocently as she jumped off the desk and crouched before the lynx, scratching its ears and under its chin.

Draco scowled, seeing Shadow close his eyes and purr in response, but before he could say anything cutting, the twins threw their arms around his neck and laughed.

"The more the merrier, we always say!" they said together.

"Will you two knock it off?" Hermione scolded. "We should hurry!"

"Where is this prophecy anyway?" Ron demanded.

Shadow answered by loping over to the lifts and twitched his stubby tail impatiently. Luna skipped after the cat with Draco hot on her heels. Soon they were all squeezed into the small elevator and heading down a level. When Ron heard the voice announce Department of Mysteries, his face paled. This was where his father had almost died.

The four Weasley children unconsciously stepped closer together. They followed the rest down a dark corridor that was nearly identical to the Entrance Hall. The only differences were that this hall was lined with doors instead of hearths and there was no spectacular fountain in the middle. It was all open space, and the sound of their footsteps echoed ominously as they made their way to the plain black door at the far end. *Department of Mysteries: Staff Only* was written above it in tall silver letters.

Draco unlocked the door after muttering at it for a few minutes, and they all stepped through to find themselves in a round room. It was completely black: the floor, the walls, and the twelve identical doors spaced evenly around the room. A single candle with a flickering blue flame hung on the walls between each door.

Luna pulled the door shut behind them and the wall began to slowly rotate, the doors with them.
Faster and faster it went until Hermione had to shut her eyes and Ginny buried her head in Neville's shoulder. Shadow slitted his eyes, rumbling deep in his chest unhappily. Neville and Draco stood motionless, both of them afraid that movement would make things worse. The twins were watching open-mouthed and made impressed noises as the candlelight became a single burning line of light across their vision. Ron covered his mouth as a wave of motion sickness settled in his stomach.

The wall came to a sudden stop, the sound of stone settling against stone filling the room with thunder. Shadow quickly trotted around the perimeter, sniffing. He stopped in front of a door and mewled pointedly.

"That's the way we came in?" Draco asked and the cat nodded.

"Flagrate!" Hermione said sharply and a fiery X appeared on the stone, burning brightly.

"Way to go, Hermione," Fred exclaimed while George whistled.

"We should each take a door," Draco suggested. "We'll meet back here in a few minutes. One of these has to be the prophecy room."

"Luna and Ginny shouldn't wander around by themselves," Ron said much to Ginny's dismay. He ignored her furious stare.

"I'll take Gin," Fred called and grabbed her hand.

"I can go by myself! There are twelve doors here, and we do have a time limit!" Ginny said hotly.

"It will be quicker," Hermione agreed.

"But they could run into trouble!" Ron protested.

"So could we!" Hermione snapped. "We either go as one group or we all split up."

Luna solved the dilemma by opening the door closest to her and stepping through. Fred and George shrugged and moved to two different doors. They walked through without a backward glance. Hermione and Ginny followed their example while Ron muttered mutinously and stepped through one of his own.

"What about you? You shouldn't go alone, not as a lynx," Neville said worriedly, looking down at his brother.

In answer, Shadow trotted over to a door and looked pointedly back at Neville. The Gryffindor opened the door and followed him inside.

Alone, Draco tried to open the door closest to him, but unlike the others his was locked. He grinned. "This has to be the one!" he said quietly and prepared to break in.

He was sweating, unaware of the minutes passing by or that no one had returned yet. He leaned forward, his wand dipping and circling as he felt his way through the locking spell placed on the door. This was even harder than getting through the lock Dumbledore had applied on the Astronomy Tower to keep Severus from escaping!

Finally, he felt the magical lock give way. Crying out in triumph, Draco threw open the door and stepped into a room of light. Eyes wide, he stared at the splendor around him. The room wasn't that big really, but it felt enormous. The walls were golden; huge Roman columns stood in rows like some kind of majestic forest. He could just barely make out figures etched into the pure marble, but
before he could take a closer look, all of his attention was consumed by the pure white globe pulsing in the center of the room.

It was about as large as a Bludger, but it wasn't solid. It floated at chest height, pulsing and shimmering. It was white, so very white, and had silver flashes and flakes glittering on its surface - just like sunlight on the surface of a gently rippling lake. Draco moved forward as if in a dream. The strangest sensations filled him as the glittering streams caressed his skin, stroked his hair, kissed his eyelids.

The light was talking to him. It was a tremendous force, but at the same time extremely gentle and delicate. It told him he was loved here. Tears burned down his face as he smiled into the globe. He was so very cherished. It desired him in a way no one had ever felt for him. Here, he would always be cared for and nurtured. This was heaven, a place where he'd never be denied or rejected.

Falling to his knees, his face uplifted and streaked with tears, Draco stared into the light and never wanted to leave.

xXx

Ron stepped into a long rectangular room. Golden lamps hung from chains and they filled the room with sharp light. A few desks were pushed against the walls, but what interested him most was the large six-foot tank filled with soft green water. Something was drifting lazily among the tank's depths. Curious despite knowing they were on a time schedule, he moved forward.

Screaming, he jumped back as a white brain floated to his side of the tank. It was as if the brain was looking at him! Totally freaked out, Ron turned to leave when he saw something flash from the brain. He froze, watching with wide eyes as thought pictures flashed before the brain. It was talking to him! It wanted him to come closer. All he had to do was place his hand on the glass and the brain would be able to give him knowledge beyond his dreams.

A picture of a chess board flashed by and Ron gasped, unconsciously moving forward. He would finally be special! The twins were so clever and Percy was perfect. Bill was the oldest and most respectable; a Curse-Breaker working in Egypt and engaged to a beautiful half-Veela! Charlie was the brave one and now he was running the Order of the Phoenix! Ginny was the baby and a girl; that made her automatically special. That left him with nothing.

Ron placed his hand on the glass and it was instantly captured by threadlike thoughts. Other brains floated over. The thought streams went right through the glass as if it wasn't there. Ron screamed, but it was too late. Both of his arms were ensnared and soon his whole torso would be wrapped up in the gleaming strands. He felt pressure build in his head and suddenly he felt crowded in his own skull.

"No! Stop!"

xXx

Luna floated through space. There was absolute silence all around her. The cold dark carried her effortlessly. Clear white light sparkled in the distance far, far away. Planets loomed before her as gorgeous balls of light. Some were filled with life, but it was all too distant to touch her senses. She saw clearly, thought more clearly, than she had in a very long time.

She smiled, arching her back, stretching her muscles and looking around her. She registered movement and colors, and none of it cut into her mind with more information than she could stand. It was just her here. She was safe from her Seer sense. Giggling, she threw her arms out wide and flew towards a nebula.
Ginny walked through a room with a million clocks happily ticking away. Light glittered and sparkled diamond-bright from the clock faces. Huge grandfather clocks stood tall and proud, cuckoo clocks hung from the walls, and smaller ones stood on desks, but the most beautiful thing in the room was in the corner. A bell jar almost as tall as she was sat on a desk. It was filled with billowing, glittering winds, and an egg sat at the bottom where it broke open, freeing a hummingbird to fly toward the top before falling back down as an egg.

It was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen. Ginny stepped forward and stared at the phenomenon, entranced. She didn't know how long she stood there, but eventually she tore her eyes away, understanding dawning.

"Time!" she cried, delighted. "This room contains time!"

A thought struck her then. She hated being so young. She hated that everyone thought they had to protect her and she would better understand Neville if she were older. He was so mature. Sometimes she felt like a little kid. He was striding out ahead of her, and she hated being left behind! Her brothers did that to her all the time. Maybe she could use this room to her advantage. She'd be careful. She just wanted to be a little older, after all.

Hermione's eyes opened wide as she looked around the room she found herself in. The walls were lined with shelves and shelves of books. Shaking her head hard, she moved toward the desk in the corner. It was covered with notes written in a long elegant hand. There was something there about house elves. Scowling at herself, she huffed and looked away. I'm here looking for the prophecy, she admonished herself.

"But maybe the prophecies are written in these books," she muttered, her eyes taking them in with longing. Who knew what great knowledge they held? "Just a quick look," she promised, snatching up a volume and settling into the chair at the desk. It molded itself to her body and she sank in, completely forgetting where she was and her purpose.

Fred found himself in a lab. White light poured down from the ceiling, making sure there were no dark corners. Rows and rows of tables with strange gadgets and equipment, both Muggle and Wizard, lay strewn about the room almost haphazardly. Notes were discarded next to interesting inventions. He glanced at them briefly and grinned when he immediately saw the problem. He wasn't quite sure what the invention did, but once he got it working he could figure it out. After all, it might come in handy later that night.

Someone would find him if the prophecy room was found. He had left the door open and would hear if anything went wrong. No one would care or even be surprised if he looked around a bit. Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, he began tinkering with the first project on the lab table.

Neville followed Shadow into a large room that looked vaguely like an amphitheater. It was dark and gloomy, causing him to squint to see what was at the bottom. He was halfway down the stairs before he saw it. In the middle of a pit almost twenty feet deep stood a square platform. An archway stood in the center.
It looked so ancient that Neville was certain that it was going to crumble as he watched. Whispers just beyond his hearing caught his attention. Neville's brown eyes moved to take in the fluttering black veil hanging between the archway. As soon as he looked at it, the whispering became louder.

"Hello?" he called, his voice trembling a bit. "Who's there?"

His voice made the lynx jump. The cat shook its head and hissed, pinning its ears flat to his head, but Neville didn't notice this. All his attention was fixed on the whispers. He could almost… make them… out… He moved forward, still straining to hear. Was someone there? Who was calling him? The voice sounded so familiar, but not in a way that reminded him of a specific person or face.

One brown eye, one golden went wide as Neville moved closer to the dais and stretched out his hand toward the veil. The lynx bounded down the steps and leapt. Neville staggered under the thirty-five pound weight, but continued to move forward without so much as a backward glance.

Shadow bit down and got a good grip on Neville's sweater. He spread his paws and pulled backward, halting his brother's forward motion.

"Hello? I can hardly hear you!" Neville called, oblivious to his brother behind him. He shook his head, looking astonished. "It can't be… Dad? Is that you, Dad?"

Shadow considered returning to human form. He'd be able to restrain Neville and drag him back to the door, but he didn't want any record of Snape's son here tonight. Later he would be retrieving the prophecy and that would blow his cover as Shadow completely. Besides, whatever spell was on that veil that had Neville captivated could potentially effect him too once he transformed. Then they both would be lost.

Decided, Shadow clamped his jaws shut and held on, hoping someone would come and help him soon.

xXx

George walked into a dark, cavernous room filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Small dusty balls filled the shelves in neat rows. Fading or new yellow tags were attached to the wood, identifying each orb. He reached for one and a blue spark snapped at his fingers. Yelping, he yanked his hand away and sucked at the singed fingers. He scowled and moved down the rows, noticing that the orbs were placed alphabetically.

He moved quickly, but he didn't find anything among the P's. He turned the other way in search for the D's. There, halfway down row ninety-seven, he found a yellow place card that read: *S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D. Dark Lord and (?) Harry Potter.* This was it! These were definitely prophecies and this was Shadow's! Looking around carefully to remember the spot, George turned and headed back for the door.

He made a few wrong turns, but five minutes or so later he stumbled back into the round black room with the twelve doors; nine of which still stood open while one stood shut with a glowing X, indicating the door back to the lifts. No one else was back in the center room. He wondered what was taking so long.

Running to the first open door to his right, he stepped into a room with a glowing green tank in the center. There he found Ron lying on the floor, wrapped in thick shimmering threads. He was jerking spasmodically and making awful gurgling sounds. George ran forward, screaming his little brother's name, but Ron didn't react. Coming closer, he could smell burnt cotton and flesh. The strands were burning his brother down to the bone!
"You were right, Ron," he said tightly, kneeling beside the whimpering teen. "We should have gone in pairs at least."

Very carefully, he summoned the strands and banished them back into the tank where, horrifically, six white brains floated, pressed up against the glass and looming over his brother. It took a good ten minutes before Ron was free. George grabbed his mangled forearms and dragged him back into the black center room.

"Shit, Ron!" George cried in dismay.

His brother was a mess. His face was bone white and his eyes flickered rapidly behind his thin eyelids. He was unresponsive and deep burns covered his arms and torso. George realized with a sudden sense of fear that the wounds could prove to be fatal if he didn't get his little brother to help soon, but what about the others?

Cursing, George got up and ran for the next open door. "Hermione!" he snapped, astonished to find her so thoroughly distracted from their mission and the state of her companions.

The bushy-haired girl lifted her head and a guilty blush filled her cheeks. "I was just…"

"I don't care," George snarled. "Ron's hurt and the others may be as well. Come on!"

Hermione stood and hurried after the distraught teen. She gasped as soon as she saw her best friend. She fell to her knees and began casting the only healing charm she knew. It was very weak, but it caused his gasping breaths to deepen and his eyes to stop rolling quite so violently.

George saw that she was helping and darted for another door. He returned a few minutes later with Ginny. Hermione stared up at her with an open mouth. Ginny was a woman. She looked thirty years old! She was tall, big-breasted, and very beautiful: her long, thick hair shimmered in the candlelight.

Ginny strode over to Ron and her beautiful dark eyes took in his mangled from. "Is he okay?" she asked worriedly, her voice now deeper and throaty.

Hermione could only nod, silenced at the sight of her should be fourteen-year-old friend.

George came back with Fred next. His twin was grinning, but there was something about his eyes that spoke of shame. He went with his brother into the next open door. They were gone for a good five minutes. Ginny sat with Hermione and her brother, saying nothing. Hermione didn't know what to ask her. She was ashamed of herself and wanted to avoid telling Ginny she had been reading while everyone else needed help. How could she do something like that?

The twins reappeared with Luna between them. The girl had tears streaking her face, but she walked freely. She sat next to Ginny without a word as the twins rushed for another open door. Hermione muttered the healing charm again over Ron and Luna cast one of her own. Ron still looked awful. The smell was starting to get to them when Fred and George reappeared, wrestling a violently struggling Neville between them.

The lynx ran past, following Draco's scent toward the door that had gentle white light pouring from it. He found his friend kneeling in a supplicating position. Shadow felt the draw of love and his insides did a funny little turn, but it couldn't seduce him the way it had Draco. First of all, the person he loved was sitting there vulnerable and obviously not himself. He had no time to enjoy being loved by the light when the person he loved was possibly being hurt. He grabbed Draco's arm in his teeth and pulled hard.

"Ow!" Draco cried, distracted. Slowly, he turned his head and looked into the lynx's eyes. Instantly
he remembered Shadow's songs, his smile, his laughter; he remembered flying and sleeping beside each other, Boy's tears and Demon's rage; he remembered Shadow. His stomach dropped. He had almost left him. How could he do that?

Shadow didn't let go of the blond's arm as they hurried from the room. As soon as Draco saw everyone huddled in the center around a severely injured Ron, he realized that they all had fallen prey to the things in the Department of Mysteries. He felt a bit better about his own weakness, but it still made him feel humiliated.

"Ron needs help," George said when they were all together. "And Ginny, too."

"It's ten o'clock. We've wasted almost two hours," Fred scowled, standing guard over a trembling Neville.

"That's the prophecy room." George gestured to an open door to the right. "I found the one about the Dark Lord and Harry. It's at the end of row ninety-seven."

"I think Ginny and Luna should take Ron up and get him help," Fred said lowly. He didn't want them to get hurt anymore.

"No way! I'm seeing this through!" Ginny protested hotly, looking at her brothers and matching them stare for stare. She was definitely more intimidating as a woman, and the twins shared an uneasy glance.

"I can't go by myself," Luna muttered, eyes wide. "A Hobnob might get me turned around."

"I'm staying with Shadow," Neville stated, looking away and blushing hotly. Now he had something to prove. He had already let Shadow down once tonight. He wasn't leaving it like that.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere." Draco sneered, crossing his arms. It's not like he even cared about the Weasel or anyone else. He was here for Shadow and that was it.

Ginny stared at Neville. Her boyfriend couldn't leave; his brother still needed him. She looked at Ron, the brother she was closest to, and realized that her brother needed her, too. "Fine. I'll go."

"I'll stay," Hermione offered. "I'm okay." Unlike Ron and Ginny, she hadn't been hurt or altered physically, and unlike Neville and Draco, she wasn't hurt mentally or emotionally. Harry - Shadow! - needed steady wands with him.

Luna stood and helped Ginny get Ron to his feet. The others watched them head back toward the lifts, the door with the glowing X shutting behind them.

"Oh no!" Hermione cried. She whipped her wand up and quickly cast, "Flagrate!"

She had moved just in time. All the open doors slammed shut, but the prophecy room door now glowed with a red X. The walls and doors began to spin again. The five remaining teens closed their eyes against the sight of the blue candles and the red Xs blurring and smearing across their vision. They only opened them again when they heard the stones grind together as the wall came to a sudden stop. Now two doors had X's. Fred and George opened both and looked in.

"Over here!" Fred called.

The teens hurried over and looked into the dimly lit room with rows and rows of shelves and prophecy orbs.
"There must be billions," Hermione breathed, wide-eyed as she and the others followed George into the room.

"How can there be so many?" Neville asked faintly. "And all of them are true, right?"

"Some talk about things that are centuries in the future," Draco said indifferently. "It's not like they'll all come true tomorrow."

"But what about free will?" Hermione demanded. "Doesn't seeing this bother you?"

"Why do you assume prophecies contradict free will? If I say you'll read a book tomorrow and you do, did I take away your free will?" Draco argued, eyes narrowed at her.

"Here it is!" George shouted, cutting off whatever argument Hermione was about to launch.

Fred bent and lifted the lynx in his arms. Shadow saw the tag with the name Harry Potter and batted at the orb above it. The ball fell and Draco just managed to catch it before it hit the ground. It was a Seeker reflex; a small ball had dropped and he had caught it. He blushed, realizing that breaking it had been Shadow's intention all along.

"Very good, Dragon," a low, sardonic drawl sounded behind them. "Now turn around like a good boy and hand it over."

Draco's eyes went wide and his back went rigid. Slowly, he turned around. A Death Eater stood behind him. Just like in a hundred nightmares since that past summer, a thin pale hand reached up for the featureless white mask and pulled it away to reveal Lucius Malfoy. Lucius returned his son's stare and smiled with feverish eyes sparkling in his now gaunt face.

Draco took a step back and felt the twins come up on either side of him protectively. Even Hermione and Neville took a defensive stance at his back. A hiss at his feet brought his gaze down to the lynx who crouched right before him, puffed up and coiled dangerously. The sight of his love and the sense of the others at his back shattered the fear freezing him to the spot. This wasn't a nightmare and he wasn't alone.

"Father," he drawled as his eyes went hard. "What a surprise."

Lucius continued to smile as nine more Death Eaters appeared out of the darkness, cutting off every avenue of escape. The twins stiffened upon seeing Ginny, Ron, and Luna hanging in the arms of three masked Death Eaters. Wands were pointed firmly at their exposed throats.

"I found these," Lucius said sweetly, gesturing gracefully. "Do they belong to you? One doesn't look so good."

Draco's hand tightened around the glass orb.

"Give it to me, boy," Lucius snapped, suddenly angry. "Or you will watch them die."

"It wouldn't be the first time I've watched you kill people, Father," Draco said icily. "What makes you think that would bother me?"

Lucius laughed, delighted at his son's spunk. "Oh, Dragon. It may not bother you, but I assure you that it will bother the people who have wands at your back."

Draco darted his eyes to the side and took in Fred's hard, pale features. He looked back to his father. "If you do anything hasty, I'll simply break it. I doubt your boss would appreciate that."
A woman's laugh erupted from the Death Eater to the right of Lucius. She reached up and removed her mask, revealing a beautiful face with bright hazel-green eyes. Long golden-brown hair framed her aristocratic features. She looked like Lenora Selwyn, a fourth year Slytherin. If this woman was a Selwyn, they were in trouble.

"Do you hear him? Do you? He thinks he's in a position to negotiate!" the woman said, still laughing.

"Don't do anything rash, Selene," Lucius cautioned, knuckles white around his wand.

"Crucio!" the woman called without warning.

Ginny's eyes popped open and an awful scream tore from her throat as she thrashed in the grip of the Death Eater holding her.

The twins reacted instantly, both firing off spells unheard over their little sister's screams. Selene ducked, but the man holding Ginny wasn't quick enough. He toppled over unconscious. Ginny fell to the floor sobbing. The lynx darted forward and pulled her toward Draco by the back of her sweater. A Death Eater reached for Ginny's legs, trying to stop the cat, but Draco dropped the prophecy. Lucius screamed, halting the masked figure.

Draco snatched the orb from the air again, smiling as his father panted with fear. "Let's not do that again, shall we? My hand's feeling a bit slippery. I'm not sure I'll be able to catch it a second time."

"No one move!" Lucius bellowed, glaring hatefully at his son. "Especially you, Mrs. Selwyn!" he spat at the smirking woman.

"As you wish, Lucy," Selene smiled, eyes glowing with excitement.

"Give me the prophecy, Draco, and I'll let you and your friends go," Lucius promised, smiling sweetly, his moods shifting so quickly that Draco had a hard time following them. "My Master was ever so grateful to sense Potter down here, doing his job for him. It freed him to go to the others to help release our companions. In light of this, you'll find we can be generous."

"Of course. Let me just hand it over," Draco sneered sarcastically. "How about this, Father? You give us the other two and back off. We'll move toward the lifts. As soon as we're all on safely with you on the other side, I'll toss it to you."

"And you'd never dream of letting the lift door close before doing so," Lucius hissed, eyes narrowed. "I would expect an offer like that from Potter there not from you!" He looked down at the large feline. "Too scared to return to human form, Potter? Not so brave, are you?"

"Oh, shut up! At least he didn't run away like the Dark Lord did," Draco snapped. Lucius took a step forward, but Draco shook his hand warningly, the fragile prophecy dangling in his fingertips. "We do this my way, Father, or you'll never get what you want."

The Death Eaters shifted angrily at the blond's tone, but Lucius slashed out with his hand and they stilled again. "Fine, Dragon. Fine."

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Shadow couldn't believe this was happening! He stalked forward before Draco; the blond helping Ginny walk while holding the prophecy in his right hand. The Gryffindor girl was crying and limping, still feeling the pain of the Cruciatius Curse, but she was on her feet and moving.
Fred and George came next. Fred carried a still unconscious and badly injured Ron while George supported Luna. She was awake but groggy and had her arm thrown around George's waist for support. Hermione and Neville brought up the rear, their eyes darting around alertly and their wands steady.

They were making their way down the hall toward the lifts. The entrance to the Department of Mysteries with all the doors lay behind them. They were halfway to the lifts. Four Death Eaters, including Lucius, marched ahead of them. Their grim forms and intimidating, featureless masks watched everything they did while six more brought up the rear.

Shadow had no idea what Draco was planning. They couldn't hand over the prophecy, but Shadow didn't want the others to get hurt, either. Suddenly, the lift dinged. Everyone froze. Two Death Eaters spun to face the elevator while Lucius and another Death Eater remained facing the teens. The lift door opened and all hell broke loose.

Remus, Tonks, Moody, and Shacklebolt came pouring off the lifts, flinging spells. The Death Eaters in front fell almost immediately. Lucius and his partner spun around and began to attack in response. Shadow shouldered Draco to the side as the blond ducked a stray spell.

"Back! Go back!" Draco yelled to the others; Shadow already pushing his way toward the black room.

Two Death Eaters tried to get to Draco, but the twins were there and Shadow swiped at the nearest black-robed legs. The other Death Eaters Apparated closer to Lucius to fight against the Order. The teenagers overcame the two lone Death Eaters fairly easily and left them unconscious behind them as they ran into the center room and slammed the door. The walls blurred, the doors spun. They were all breathing hard, especially the twins who were carrying backpacks as well as Luna and Ron.

Shadow darted forward toward an X-marked door. It was the right one! It was the prophecy room! They bolted down the alleys looking for places to hide as well as other ways out or even ways that led deeper into the Department of Mysteries. They had no hope that the four Order members would be able to overcome all ten Death Eaters. The Death Eaters would be on their trail again soon.

Shadow hissed as the sounds of cracks surrounded them. The Death Eaters were already on them. *Who had taken down the Ministry Anti-Apparation Ward anyway?* he thought furiously. A cutting spell lashed out at them and the teens scattered.

"Watch out for the prophecy!" Lucius roared from somewhere in the dark.

"Love you, too, Father," Draco snarled in a whisper, impatiently brushing sweaty strands of hair out of his eyes.

"Reducto!" George yelled and a Death Eater was blasted back into a shelf. Blue lightning streaked out, electrocuting the man. He jerked and convulsed, shrieking hideously as smoke rose from his robes and the hair under his hood.

"The shelves!" Fred called loudly. "Use the shelves!"

"Don't touch them!" Hermione screamed at the same time, learning her own lesson as she severely burnt her hand.

Shadow couldn't see what was going on. He was with Neville and Luna. It sounded like George and Draco were together while Fred and Hermione were in an alley further to the right. He had no idea where Ginny was, but before he could cross over toward Draco's voice, a Death Eater appeared
before him, his wand glowing with killing green light.

Neville loosed a battle cry and a thick tooth of earth, about seven feet high, speared up through the stone ground. They were in the lowest level of the Ministry, surrounded by the earth. Neville was in his element.

Shadow scrambled back away from the crumbling dirt and dust, sneezing to clear his sensitive feline nose. He turned and chased after Neville and Luna, hoping the others would be able to make their own escapes. Luna, thankfully, seemed to be quickly coming back to her senses. She spun to the right before Shadow even sensed the new threat and bellowed, "Reducto!" That sent another Death Eater flying against the shelves to be severely singed.

Suddenly Draco, George, and Hermione darted across their alley, down a new one to the left. Three Death Eaters chased them, desperate to capture the prophecy that Draco still held in his hand. Shadow leaped, sailed a good six feet through the air, and landed right on the back of the last Death Eater.

The man screamed as Shadow's sharp claws tore into his shoulder muscles and his deadly teeth ripped into the back of his neck, trying to break it. The Death Eater stumbled but cleverly slammed backward, forcing Shadow into a prophecy shelf. Shadow yowled in agony as electricity scorched through his body and across his nerve endings.

Luna quickly shot off spells at the backs of the two Death Eaters still chasing Draco and the others. She stood boldly in the open, knowing Neville's skill with shields, confident he would protect her. Neville had already cast a shield before her and was reaching his hand forward, using a sheet of earth to pry Shadow off the shelves. The lynx collapsed, fur smoking. He twitched and jerked pitifully, eyes rolling and obviously unconscious. Neville swung him up into his arms and over his shoulder.

"Come on!" he cried and tugged at Luna's free hand.

They raced the way the others had gone, stepping carelessly over the Stupefied Death Eaters in their path. They ran down two alleys. They had lost sight of their friends. Panting, burning with adrenaline, Neville yanked Luna to the left. The door to the central room was this way, he was almost certain of it.

Luna almost blasted Ginny as she came careening around the corner. Neville grabbed her. She screamed as a flashing yellow spell almost cut her down from behind. It splashed harmlessly off the shield Neville hastily erected and Luna shot off an impressive Expelliarmus, sending the Death Eater flying and his wand sliding to their feet.

Neville stepped on it, snapping it violently in two, before pulling Ginny forward.

"Not that way! Trust me!" she cried, eyes wide and panicked.

Neville didn't slow down, but he turned another direction in response to his girlfriend's cry. They ran together until they found a door and flung themselves through. They were in the room with the bell jar. "The time room!" Ginny cried in recognition. They ran halfway down the hall when the door on the other end burst open and three Death Eaters poured in. Neville dove behind a desk as Luna threw herself behind a clock on the other side. It would give them both room to aim without getting in each others way. Ginny, however, stood frozen with fear.

"Gin!" Neville screamed, horrified.

The girl was blasted backward. She went careening over a desk and collapsed on the floor among a
shower of clock parts and glass. Neville snarled, but he remained under cover, protecting Luna as she cast furiously at the enemy. Shadow stirred at his side. Neville didn't have time to check on him; all his concentration was on his shields.

Shadow took in the near standstill through dazed eyes. The room was buzzing with magic and clocks were breaking all around the room under the pressure. Ginny appeared and managed to take one of the three Death Eaters by surprise, felling him with a simple Stupefy. That wouldn't hold him for long, but it lasted long enough for Luna to knock out the remaining two.

"We have to get out of here," Neville cried, already moving toward the other door.

Luna and Ginny - now bleeding from a gash along her hairline - followed closely on his heels. Shadow shook himself and followed after, limping slightly on his burnt pads. They burst into the amphitheater room with the veil. Neville hesitated, but it was impossible to hear whispers over the sound of battle and the clash of spells. It was madness.

Shacklebolt was battling two Death Eaters along the top tier of seats across the room, Remus was battling Selene Selwyn near the arch, while Tonks and Moody were fighting back-to-back against three Death Eater who were circling around them. The teens gasped as they noticed Fred over to the right, halfway down the stairs. He was crouched protectively over his unconscious brother and barely maintaining his shields as stray spells pounded into them.

Unable to cast offensive spells while holding shields, Fred was left with his backpack. A swamp steamed and gurgled along the top benches above him, protecting him from Death Eaters sneaking up on him, trying to get the higher ground. Smoke bombs and impenetrable pink fog screened his half of the amphitheater, making him an even more difficult target, but that was thinning and it looked like he was about out of tricks. Neville, the two girls, and Shadow ran for him.

"I think," Fred yelled when they passed his shields, "the Department of Mysteries knows it's under attack! The doors never lead to the same place twice and I can't find the center room anywhere!"

"That's not good," Neville exclaimed, replacing Fred's shields with his own.

"How's Ron?" Ginny demanded. She felt for a pulse and was distraught to feel how weakly it pulsed. Ron's breathing was so slow and shallow. She quickly cast a healing charm, the one Hermione had used, but it didn't really help.

"We have to get out of here," Fred yelled back in answer. He stood and began firing at the Death Eater dueling Tonks. The woman tossed a grateful wave, obviously overwhelmed.

Luna stood by Fred to help him attack and the redhead grinned at her. She smiled back and threw a powerful Reducto at Selene Selwyn who was coming up from the left.

"Where are the others?" Neville called.

As if in answer, a sharp scream cut across the room. Shadow's head snapped up and he leapt into the swamp at their back. It was Draco! He ignored the dismayed cries of his friends. His claws gripped the wood and vines easily, and in less then five seconds, he was across without ever touching paw to the treacherous water below. He hit a door and it burst open under his weight.

Shadow skid into a new room and froze with horror, all his fur bristling up and his ears pinned flat. Lucius Malfoy Disapparated, leaving his delighted laughter echoing behind him. Shadow was alone with Draco. The room was fairly open. Desks were shoved up against the walls; papers and notes were strewn everywhere. In the center was a huge tank with things floating inside. Shadow hardly
saw any of this. He ran across the room, toward the center where Draco lay still. He didn't notice when he transformed, but he fell to his knees beside the blond as a human again.

"Draco!" he cried helplessly. He reached for his friend's shoulder, hysteria shuddering along his nerves. "Draco! Answer me!"

Draco's eyes opened and, with a weak bloody cough, he grabbed Shadow's wrist and managed to focus on Shadow's distraught face.

"I thought you were dead, you idiot!" Shadow yelled, curling over Draco's prone form.

"He… didn't get… the prophecy…" Draco gasped, panting for air. "I… smashed it."

Shadow closed his eyes, feeling like Draco had just hit him. Here Draco was, in obvious pain, left for dead by his own bloody father, and all Draco cared about was protecting him; all Draco was worried about was making sure Shadow knew the prophecy was safe.

Shadow opened his eyes, yanked Draco up by his shirt, and crashed their lips together.

Draco gasped, utterly shocked. His hands spasmed before coming up and gripping Shadow's shoulders for support. Shadow took advantage of the parted lips beneath his and slipped his tongue inside, swiping it along Draco tongue, tasting blood - blood that had been spilt for him - and a taste that he knew was uniquely Draco's. It was a taste he had been dreaming about for months.

Moaning, they sat there, oblivious to the world, energy snapping between them, soft skin sliding, taste exploding across their tongues. Shadow opened his eyes, feeling Draco's warm breath across his cheek, and drank in the smoky-grey eyes blazing back at him.

"You… kissed me," Draco muttered inanely.

Shadow swallowed hard. "Yeah… Yeah, I did."

"Well, that's great…" Draco smiled.

Shadow couldn't help laughing at the blond's almost drunk expression. Draco pulled Shadow down and their lips touched again. This time it was slow and brief. Shadow was on his knees, hands braced on either side of blond's head. Draco's arms were wrapped around Shadow's back, gripping his shoulder blades fiercely. Their mouths were wet and warm. Draco sucked on Shadow's lower lip gently, making Shadow gasp and sending jolts of sensation shooting down his body.

Sighing, Draco's arms went lax, and their lips parted with a soft sound. Shadow sat back and pulled the unconscious teen so that his head and shoulders were pillowed by his thighs. He had a sudden insane urge to cry. His lips were on fire, his heart was threatening to burst a hole through his constricted chest, and he felt hot and tingly. He couldn't believe he had just kissed Draco and Draco had kissed him back!

"I hate to interrupt, but… I think I have a problem."

Shadow's head snapped around and he caught sight of George huddled under a table. He was holding his right arm to his chest and it didn't look good. It was bent in about three different places; the hand and forearm looked mangled. Hermione lay unconscious next to the redhead, a steady stream of blood trickling out of her nose.

Shadow gently lowered Draco to the ground. He thought for sure if it weren't for the battle demanding his attention, he'd be screaming about now. They had kissed! Dizzily, Shadow somehow
managed to get to George without falling down.

"We can't get out. The Department of Mysteries won't let us leave as long as the battle's going on," Shadow explained, forcing his scattered wits back into coherency. "Fred has a good defensible position. If we can get there…"

George nodded jerkily and tried to stand. He yelled hoarsely, pain wracking his form. "I got it," he hissed when Shadow tried to help him. "Get Draco. Go!"

Reluctantly, Shadow turned and ran for the blond. It was quick work, levitating the unconscious blond with his wand and then casting the spell again, this time wandlessly, on Hermione. George staggered in front of him. Muttering a password, he stepped out onto the water and walked easily across its surface as if it were pavement. Shadow quickly copied him and followed after with the two injured teens.

"Shadow!" Neville cried out, panicked seeing his brother's return in human form!

Shadow shook his head. He had no time to hide in his Animagus form. Things were looking really grim. Even as he watched, Remus fell against Lucius and Selene. Tonks was about to go down as well and Shacklebolt was being maneuvered toward the dais with the veil where all four Order members were being herded. The Death Eaters were just playing with them now.

He grabbed the backpack George managed to drag with him and threw out more smoke bombs while Ginny helped get Draco and Hermione comfortable next to Ron and keeping them all out of the way. George sat next to the three unconscious teens, looking exhausted and like he was minutes away from passing out himself. Luna and Fred were firing spells more frantically now, and Shadow added his own wand to the battle.

Four Death Eaters broke away from the rest. They were heading toward them and Shadow had a feeling they were going to enjoy breaking through to tear them apart. It was their fault for destroying the prophecy and making them fail their Master, after all. Someone was going to pay for that and it looked like they had their sights set on Shadow and his friends.

Ginny screamed as two sliver streams of light left a crater in the ground not three feet from her. The Death Eaters laughed while Neville strained to force his shields to cover them all again. He was running out of spell energy; it wasn't something he had very much of to begin with and being able to ground his shields only helped so much.

There was a loud explosion of light as a rancid yellow spell hit the shields. The backlash was so strong, it cut through the rippling shields and threw Luna off her feet. She screamed as she landed in the swamp with a sticky splash. Fred yelled something ugly and slashed out with his wand, spinning one of the six Death Eaters off their feet. He fell a second later, a spell leaking in through the battered shields, making him scream in agony.

"No!" Shadow yelled, recognizing the Cruciatus.

He darted forward and used one of his father's spells. The Death Eater fell back, screaming as blood erupted from his face, a deep cut had opened up one cheek from forehead to jaw. Shadow pulled Fred's still weakly twitching body deeper behind their defenses; George reached forward with his good arm and helped.

Ron, Hermione, and Draco were possibly dying; George and Fred were severely wounded; Luna was still struggling in the swamp; Ginny was useless due to shock and huddled in on herself. Only he and Neville had any strength left, and Neville couldn't last much longer.
Panic clawed up his throat and he felt his hands begin to shake. Something deep in his mind stirred and Shadow screamed in denial. Demon - Seraphim - whatever! - scared him more than anything. He didn't want to lose control of himself. He didn't want to disappear! What if he hurt his friends? But he couldn't calm down and the dark entity of pain and rage was waking. His alter would take over if he didn't do something to get his friends out of this death trap!

"Professor Snape!" Neville cried out, relieved beyond measure.

Shadow’s head snapped up and he looked across the way. A smile broke across his face and he let loose a little cry. Severus stood framed in the doorway, his face set in hard lines, deadly intent almost blazing from him. He was filthy, but he moved with snake-like quickness and grace, almost flying down the stairs to engage the Death Eaters about to finish off the Order members on the dais.

Sirius sprinted in after him with a battle cry on his lips. He ran straight for the Death Eaters that were pressing down on the teens and soon Shadow and Neville were looking at their backs as the Death Eaters turned to engage the Animagus. Finally given a few moments reprieve, Neville let go of the shields and slammed his hands on the floor.

The ground heaved violently under their feet; rock and earth rose around them in a small four foot wall that they could crouch behind safely. Shadow peered over the edge and laughed a bit as he watched his father round up the surprised, wounded, and tired Death Eaters by the veil. Two Apparated away to who knew where, but the four remaining Death Eaters were viciously bound, gagged, and rendered unconscious. Severus snapped all of their wands carelessly under his boot.

Moody didn't look up at his rescuer, Shadow noticed, turning instead to crouch over an injured Tonks. Remus was already waking up and getting unsteadily to his feet. Shacklebolt shouted what looked like questions at Severus. The Potions Master gave sneering, clipped responses. Shadow scowled at this. His father had saved them, for god's sake!

Sirius was just securing the two Death Eaters he managed to catch when a crack of Apparation sounded behind him. The ex-convict heard it and began to spin around, but it was too late. He toppled over, unconscious, as Lucius Malfoy cackled in triumph and turned to face his true target. Severus hadn't heard Lucius's return. He was too far away.

Shadow jumped to his feet, screaming a warning, but Lucius already fired. The red spell hit Severus squarely in the back and he fell forward. The world crumbled away at the edges; Shadow's scream shrunk and distorted in his ears as he watched in slow motion his father's stringy, greasy hair stream out behind him as he half-turned. Then he just... disappeared into the veil.

Shock, terror, rage ripped through Shadow at once and exploded behind his eyes. What did that mean? Where had Severus gone? Moody and Shacklebolt were right there! They could have caught him! Half out of his mind, Shadow ran down the steps, blind to Lucius. The man laughed and Apparated away, his work done.

Remus reached for Shadow desperately. "There's nothing you can do!" he yelled, wrapping his arms around the distraught teen tightly, imprisoning him against his chest. "SHADOW! Stop! It's too late! He's dead… He's DEAD!"

"NOOOOO!" Shadow shrieked and shattered into a million pieces.

Seraphim came roaring to the surface, filling the body it slept within. His rage was so great that it felt like reality - the walls - the world -rippled around him, trying to get away. Never had he felt so purely furious, because it wasn't just rage he felt. A grief so shattering and horrible twinned throughout the anger and drove him beyond the brink of sanity.
He swore! He swore nothing would hurt him again, and it fucking hurt! It made him crazy! He hated these people. He hated all people! They hurt him and they never stopped hurting him. Even when they didn't fucking touch him, they were hurting him! When did it stop? It would never STOP!

Roaring, the teen flung Remus off him, literally sending him flying across the room. Moody jumped to his feet, his magical eye spinning so fast that it flew from his head and began to smoke on the floor. Seraphim slapped his hand out and the old Auror went flying. He smashed into the benches and something cracked. Shacklebolt froze in place, just staring at the teen before him, taking in the green eyes blazing with insanity, the black curls thrashing in an unfelt wind, and the young face twisted with grief and anger.

Seraphim was oblivious to the Auror's scrutiny. He stood there screaming his defiance to the world. He smashed and he tore, he killed, but it didn't help really. It still hurt! Suddenly, an idea struck the alter. It was so new and unusual that he had to laugh. If smashing these pathetic little insects didn't stop him from hurting, maybe he had to find the thing that hurt and put it right.

But what had he lost? What had hurt him? Seraphim looked around madly. Then he saw. A person with brown hair was holding his Boy up. No, his name wasn't Boy anymore. They weren't Boys, damn it all! It was Draco. Yes, Draco. Seraphim flickered. One second he was on the dais, the next he was standing in front of Neville.

Snarling, Seraphim threw the Gryffindor to the side, ignoring the yelp as the teen hit the wall. He caught Draco in his arms and screamed when he saw the damage Draco had suffered. He cradled the blond to his chest carefully, filling him with healing magic, the light and sparkly magic that glittered just beyond reach, but it came when he called for it. It was his the way the Dark magic was his.

Draco arched in his arms, crying out as the magic saturated his body and set things right. Seraphim held him for long seconds before Draco blinked, tears sliding unnoticed down his face. Seraphim stared into his eyes, his head tilted, and spoke in a tight, confused voice.

"What hurts? Tell me how to fix it."

"I feel fine," Draco said softly. He twisted a bit and Seraphim set him on his feet.

"Severus…" George croaked, his voice dry and clearly showing that the redhead was still in severe pain. "He fell… He fell through the veil."

"No!" Draco gasped and spun to look at it, horror in his eyes.

"What does that mean? Tell me!" Seraphim demanded, grabbing Draco by the shoulders and shaking him. Draco was too shocked to answer. He just kept staring. Seraphim growled and slashed his hand out at the redhead.

George gasped, going rigid as the magic ruthlessly invaded his every cell. Panting, sweating, he eventually lifted himself to his hands and knees, his body completely healed.

Seraphim marched over to him, ignoring the other teens who lay still or unconscious around them. He lifted George by the shirt and snarled into his face. "Tell me!"

"Severus! Your father! He fell through the veil. He's gone!" George cried out, kicking helplessly at the air as the alter lifted him off the ground.

Seraphim dropped George carelessly and flickered again. He appeared before the veil. Father… He didn't have a father, but he knew there was a second self. Until now, he had never before understood
that what hurt Shadow also hurt him. It infuriated him! How was he supposed to make sure never to hurt again when this Shadow was Outside and he Inside?

Confused, hurting, angry, Seraphim flickered and appeared before the veil with a furious scream.

"Seph! NO!" Draco bellowed, horrified. He raced down the steps to his friend, but it was too late. Seraphim was up to the elbows in the veil.

The alter strained with all his might against the pull of the fluttering curtain. The cords of his neck stood in sharp relief, sweat literally dripped down his face and soaked his shirt at the back and chest. Draco ran, heedless of the danger of falling. All he could think about was pulling Seph out of there.

Seraphim screamed painfully. Waves of magic rose off the alter like steam, like sparkling fog, and was sucked into the veil. The Dark magic and the healing magic became visible as Seraphim strained. Blood began to trickle from his nose, from his eyes. Draco screamed at him, demanding Seph let go, to come back. The alter was almost up to his shoulders, his feet were sliding slowly, so slowly, forward. Shacklebolt held Draco firmly, preventing him from grabbing a hold of the teen.

"Give… Him… BACK!" Seraphim growled. His eyes still blazed and magic literally poured off his form, but he was losing the battle and exhaustion was already tinting his voice. No! He wouldn't cower anymore. He wouldn't submit anymore to anything! He'd fight. He was going to stop the endless cycle of pain; it was going to end here! "GIVE HIM BACK NOW!"

Thick, vaporous whips of pure magic rose off the alter and snapped at the archway, piercing through the veil. Seraphim screamed and pulled back with all his strength and slowly he began to pull his arms free.

Shacklebolt's mouth dropped open as the ground trembled under their feet and the archway began to crumble. Draco lashed out and finally freed himself from the Auror's steel-like grip. He flung his arms around Seraphim's waist, ignoring the magical shock that stung his arms, and pulled backward.

Seraphim's hands came free and Draco gasped. The alter had something! Then Severus's head popped out, the man's shoulder's, his torso… The three of them fell backward on top of one another. Seraphim sat up and cradled the unconscious man to his chest. He looked up at Draco with tortured green eyes.

"This is him?" he asked, his voice thready and weak.

"Yes," Draco reassured him, laughing. "You did it! You saved him, Seph!"

Seraphim looked down at this new person he had to protect, feeling triumph that he had finally won. He had stopped the endless pain. Draco and this pale, silent man; these were the two people whose loss would hurt him. He couldn't really fathom why this would be so, but he knew that ignoring the reality would be pointless. The loss of either person would hurt him whether he understood or not, and he wasn't about to let that happen.

Unsteady ground heaved violently and the arch with the veil completely disintegrated. Shacklebolt stumbled back, coughing against the dust. Draco covered his face, protecting it. Seraphim gasped, but managed to stand and drag the blond and Severus further up the benches and away from the collapsing ruin. The ground was still shaking and it was getting worse.

"We have to get out of here!" Shacklebolt screamed, already crouching over Tonks. "The whole place is going to come down." He pulled the woman over toward Remus and ran to check on Moody. He shook his head sadly. He was dead. Moving on, Shacklebolt moved to check on
Severus.

Seraphim snarled at the man in warning, a murderous fury rising in his expression.

"I've got them!" Draco called. "Get the others!"

Shacklebolt's dark eyes measured the filthy blond for a moment before levitating Remus and Tonks up to the earthen defenses that the teenagers were hiding behind. He had to get his injured Order members and the incapacitated Death Eaters all in one place before he could activate his portkey.

Straining, falling twice, he managed to get Tonks, Remus, Sirius, and the Death Eaters over to the makeshift fortress with the frightened and injured teens. He turned to see where Draco was, wondering what was taking the blond so long to get Shadow and Severus up there. The room was empty. They were gone.

Shacklebolt took a step forward, determined to search for them, when the ground gave a mighty heave, throwing him off his feet. He crawled over to the bodies of his allies and charges. "Get in close. Make sure everyone is touching some part of me!" he bellowed desperately.

The air was filling with so much dust and grit he could hardly breathe. He lay flat among the pile of bodies and hoped to Merlin he had everyone. No one was going to survive the collapse of floor nine of the Ministry. He activated the portkey and felt the tug behind his navel just as a large chunk of the ceiling came down, missing the helpless group by mere seconds.

Chapter end.
Salvage

The whole fucking building was falling on their heads, a dead Auror was sprawled across from them, Severus wasn’t breathing, and they only had seconds before Kingsley came back for them.

“Just a little blood,” Draco wheedled the exhausted Seraphim. “On the ring. And we’ll go away to a safe place, promise!”

Face twisted in rage and despair at never being done, Seraphim very reluctantly listened to the not-boy. He cut his thumb on debris, hissing at the sting, and spread it on the ring.

“Take me home!” Draco called hoarsely.

Covered in dust, sweat, and grime, the blond picked himself up off the floor of Shadow’s bedroom and flung himself to the floor and cast the only diagnostic spell that he knew. It instantly revealed that Severus’s heart wasn’t beating and his brain was shutting down.

"What?" Seraphim asked suspiciously, frowning as he registered Draco's rising distress.

"He’s hurt," Draco said curtly, unwilling to say Severus was dead considering the alter’s reaction from before.

Seraphim scooted over on his knees and flicked his hand. Draco watched with bated breath. He had to admit the suddenly wide green eyes and the horror-struck expression weren't reassuring in the least.

"I… I can’t… It's gone!" Seraphim whispered intensely. He jumped to his feet, staring at his hands in shock.

Whipping his wand around, Draco cast a spell designed to shock the heart into beating again. Admittedly, he had only ever practiced it a few times before, but it was better than nothing.

“No… NO!…” Seraphim bellowed, terror and fury rising in his voice.

Magic was the only thing that gave him power when all the world would have him powerless and broken. It was his one security; his sanity depended on it. Flinging his hands at the walls hysterically, no magic came to his call, neither the healing magic nor the Black magic.

"No! Give it back. Give it back! GIVE IT BACK!"

Draco cast the heart-starting spell a third time, trying his best to ignore the raging alter as Seraphim flung furniture and attacked the walls. The hysterical howling wrecked Draco's concentration to the point where he had to scream the spell just to remain steady.

Omi chose that moment to pop into the room, obviously distraught. His round eyes were red-rimmed and snot dripped from his nose. He had obviously sensed Severus’s death.

Seraphim screeched at seeing the creature and attacked it with his bare hands. Omi screamed and disappeared, leaving Seraphim to fall to the floor.

"SHUT UP, DAMN YOU!” Draco bellowed, just as Severus jerked and took a deep breath, his
bloodshot eyes popping open.

Shocked that Draco had yelled at him, Seraphim curled up against the wall and began to sob as he watched the two humans in the room.

"Severus… Oh, Merlin, Severus!" Draco was almost crying himself. "Omi!"

The elf returned, looking stunned.

"I need potions. All the healing potions you can find. HURRY!"

The elf disappeared with a loud crack, causing Seraphim to flinch and cry harder. He was tearing at his curls, drawing blood in his distress and literally ripping out small locks.

"Seph, it's okay," Draco said, sparing him only half his attention. He was about at his breaking point. "It's okay. The magic will come back. It just needs rest and then it will come back. You used a lot of it getting Severus back." He could only hope he was telling the truth.

Seraphim stilled his frantic movements at hearing this but still gasped in quick, tight breaths.

Severus moaned, his eyes unfocused and Draco feverishly prayed the man didn't have brain damage or, worse, had become soulless. Omi reappeared and dropped about thirty bottles in front of Draco. He stood nearby, wringing his hands and watching Draco's movements tensely as he stared at both his Master and Young Master alternately. His round blue eyes were huge and deeply troubled.

Draco read labels quickly, sniffed at ones that weren't labeled, and chose four. He poured them all down Severus's throat. The man didn't fight him, choking and sputtering after each one.

"Severus, hey," Draco called softly, patting the man's cheek with a shaking, dirt-covered hand. "Can you hear me? Talk to me, Severus. You need to stay awake."

Severus turned his face away, but he didn't respond in any other way.

Seraphim was still crying against the wall, and Omi was beginning to make a quiet whining noise.

"Severus, please!" Draco begged, almost clawing at the man's arm. "I need you! I can't do this on my own! What about Shadow? You can't leave us!"

"Drac…" Severus croaked, pain flashing across his face, "… be… quiet…"

Laughing, Draco covered his face, almost boneless with relief. Before he knew it, he was crying into his hands. This whole night had been a bloody nightmare! He was never doing anything like that ever again.

xXx

Voldemort walked into his makeshift throne room. The long hall was windowless. The floor, walls, and arched ceiling were made of cold granite, lit only by three floating magical chandeliers. So far the hall was absent of decoration or furnishings except for his marble and gold, tall-backed throne. It was the only thing in the room.

The Dark Lord sat regally, his pitch-black robes draping elegantly around him, accentuating his bone-white, hairless skin. His hands rested loosely on the armrests, the curled nails tapping gently. Nagini slithered out from behind the throne and lifted her large head, draping it casually in her Master's lap. Voldemort stroked her scales absently. Cold fury radiated from his snakelike features;
his blood-red eyes smoldered.

Of the ten Death Eaters he sent to steal the prophecy from Potter, only four had returned. Worse, they had returned empty-handed. He had just finished ruthlessly plundering their memories and had assigned their punishment to his newly freed servants. Dear Bella was especially pleased with this, and they had begun screaming before Voldemort had even left the room.

He had much to consider. Sensing Potter at the Ministry had been a surprise. He wasn't ready to deal with the maddening Boy Hero yet. The child had surprisingly Dark power hidden within him that Voldemort didn't want to waste unnecessarily. He'd find a way to tear that power away from the brat and make it his own, but until then, he was not ready to face that delicious Dark typhoon.

"Potter will pay with his life," he promised his beloved snake. "But first the despicable child will make me a Dark God on Earth."

Nagini hissed, her fangs bared in excitement.

Voldemort stroked her tight coils soothingly as he considered the memories he had stolen from his useless servants. He was surprised at how well the children and the unidentifiable redheaded woman had done against some of his best minions. They were obviously being trained by someone with skill.

Even considering the arrival of the four Order members and the young Earth Elemental displaying his power, the teens had done better than expected. He would have to keep that in mind for future plans. The Elemental would be his first target, since the boy was capable of causing too much damage.

Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated. A minute later Wormtail came scurrying into the room, sniveling and whimpering in fear.

"Y-Yes, Master?"

"I want you to obtain as much information on this boy as possible," Voldemort ordered coldly, ruthlessly implanting a picture of the brown-haired teen.

Wormtail cried out in pain and groveled at the Dark Lord's feet. "Yes, my L-Lord. That is Neville L-Longbottom. I will find out everything, M-Master."

"Go!"

Wormtail yelped and fled from the room as fast as he could.

Voldemort settled back in his chair, fury and bloodlust swirling just beneath the surface. The image of Severus Snape rose in his mind. The hate he held for the traitor, the one who had fooled him so completely, was endless. Snape would suffer until he begged for forgiveness, and only then would Voldemort end his pathetic life. As for Snape's brat, the boy must have arrived with Snape and gotten Potter away before joining the others. But now that Voldemort had an image of Snape's spawn, he'd be sure to slaughter him alongside his faithless father.

The Dark Lord began to laugh. The sinister sound slowly grew to fill the empty hall with chilling echoes. Maybe he would participate in his Death Eater's punishments. Dark magic shimmered around his form hungrily as he made his way toward the dungeon, smiling in anticipation.

xXx
Charlie walked through Grimmauld Place, his hands behind his back and his face set in haggard lines. It was Christmas and all the sitting rooms were filled with groaning, injured people. Ron was upstairs, also gravely injured, but luckily Fred and Hermione were easily set to rights, although it would be a few days before they recovered fully.

Luna had been safely sent home with her father, only a little worse for wear because of the swamp, but Neville was still magic-sick and there was still no solution to Ginny's advanced aging. Remus and Tonks would make a full recovery; Remus could be found eat Neville’s bedside. Sirius was healed and was helping Madam Pomfrey, fetching her things and applying salves and handing out potions.

Kingsley walked beside Charlie, his face remote and his voice silent. Minerva, the last of their Triad, was lying in the green sitting room. She had been severely injured along with seventeen others during the attack on Azkaban. Poppy said she would be limping for a while and would require the use of a cane.

At first, the battle at Azkaban had gone well. They were turning back the Death Eaters and managed to re-secure all the prisoners, but then the Dark Lord had arrived and all hell had broken loose. Six Order members and nine Aurors died. This all happened ten minutes after Mrs. Longbottom arrived unexpectedly on the scene and informed Remus that she feared Neville was in trouble. Things were well in hand, so Charlie had agreed that he could go help the teen, sending Kingsley, Tonks, and Moody with him just in case.

They lost members, lost the prisoners, lost the Dementors. The only thing good that had come out of the battle was that the Ministry could no longer deny Voldemort's return. Almost a dozen Aurors had seen him, but as awful as the battle turned out to be, at least it was clear cut. The story that Kingsley came back with about the Department of Mysteries was not so comprehensible.

It seemed that while the rest of the Death Eaters were attacking Azkaban, the Inner Circle was trying to get the prophecy. Somehow the nine teenagers learned of this and decided to go on their own to stop Voldemort's ten best soldiers. Despite the long odds, it seemed that not only had the kids managed to get the prophecy - which only the Dark Lord or Harry Potter could do - they also managed to successfully destroy it and keep it out of Death Eater hands. More shocking still, it seemed that Moody's - God rest his soul - conspiracy theory might have been right.

Although Shadow hadn’t turned into the Dark creature that had attacked St Mungo's, something strange had happened to him. Kingsley described the teen's eyes turning an inhuman, killing-curse green and then displaying superhuman speed, strength, and phenomenal magical strength. Shadow also seemed not to recognize anyone and showed great antipathy toward everyone except Draco and Severus. He even flung Neville away, injuring him in the process, and it was well known that Shadow and Neville were close.

Not only that, but it seemed that in this state Shadow didn't even know his own father. Another oddity Kingsley reported was that Draco had called him Seph not Shadow. Kingsley was insistent that Shadow had somehow become possessed by something; an evil spirit or maybe the Dark Lord himself. Although this last didn't make sense. Why would the Dark Lord care about Draco and rescue Severus, who had been marked for death because he was a traitor?

These were just a few of the hundreds of questions Charlie wanted answers to. Unfortunately, Draco, Shadow, and Severus had all disappeared, leaving no trace or clue as to their whereabouts. On the other hand, Charlie had access to the teens who had been present. They might even know what had happened to Shadow down there.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie stepped into the twins' bedroom. Fred was sleeping off healing potions
and Ginny, still a thirty-year-old woman, was sleeping next to him. George, however, was wide awake and sitting close by his twin's side in a chair next to the bed. He had been completely healed by Shadow - or was it Seph? - but he still looked worn. His hair was limp and hung in his pale face and there was something in his eyes that made him seem older than he had been yesterday morning.

"Dad's coming home in a few hours. St Mungo's released him," Charlie offered. He moved further into the room and sat at the end of the bed, facing his little brother.

"That's good," George said with a faint smile.

"Mom's excited." Charlie sighed and reached up, gently pulling his hair out of the ponytail. It fell around his shoulders in a rusty wave. He cracked his neck and tried to relax some of the tension in his shoulders. As comfortable as he was likely to get, Charlie returned his attention to his nervous brother. Lifting an eyebrow, he asked, "Care to tell me what happened yesterday?"

George glanced behind his older brother. Kingsley was leaning against the closed door. His stance was casual, but George wasn't fooled. Kingsley was practically straining forward, eager for information. The redhead frowned at Charlie. "Can we talk alone?"

Charlie regarded the teen and realized that George wouldn't budge on this point. He nodded his head, not bothering to turn around. There was a tense moment of silence before the door opened and Kingsley stepped out of the room. Charlie turned around and, very carefully and obviously, spelled the room and door with silencing and anti-surveillance wards. When he was done, George flashed him a grateful smile.

"What's up?" Fred asked groggily. George helped him sit up.

"I think you know what's up. I want to know what happened." Charlie's expression softened and a hint of brotherly exasperation crept into his voice. "What were you thinking, going down there without telling anyone and taking your little brother and sister with you?"

"It wasn't exactly the plan to engage the enemy," Fred drawled wryly.

"What was the plan?" Charlie asked, his gaze hard as he looked at them.

The twins exchanged a glance. Fred said, "We heard the Death Munchers were going to hit the prophecy and we decided to destroy it before they got there. In and out with no one the wiser."

"We didn't invite the brats," George growled, scowling lightheartedly at Ginny. "They sort of insisted."

"How did you think you could get the prophecy? You know that the only ones who can touch it are those who the prophecy is about."

The twins sat silent.

Charlie's voice grew hard. "I think you'd better tell me the whole truth now. I don't think you realize how much trouble you're in."

The twins swallowed hard. "Look," George said, leaning forward earnestly. "Neville came here and told us what was going down. We don't know how he knew; we didn't ask."

"We agreed to help him out and watch his back." Fred nodded, eyes darting to his pale little sister. He still vividly recalled Selwyn casting the Cruciatius on her. He knew firsthand what that was like now and it was awful.
"Then Ron, Ginny, and Hermione got suspicious and cornered us. They threatened to blow the whole thing if we didn't let them come," George added, head downcast. "So we took them to Neville. They convinced him to let them come along instead of just tying them up there. We flooed to the Leaky Cauldron and then took a Muggle taxi to the Ministry's public entrance. Draco and Shadow were waiting for us there."

Between the two of them, they described meeting Luna and getting distracted by the different rooms in the Department of Mysteries. Ginny woke up by this point and explained in a small shamed voice how she was tempted to age herself and how George had to pull her out of the bell jar. He tried to time it right, but she had been thirty when she fell out of it. At least that was better than being a baby or an old woman.

"Whoa, stop!" Charlie raised his hands. "So the prophecy just rolled off on its own? You summoned it, George? Ginny, you saw someone throw a rock at it and tip it off?"

The three flushed red and looked at their hands in their lap.

Charlie sighed. He was exhausted, he'd been up for almost twenty-four hours now, but if what he suspected was true, he understood his siblings wanting to protect their friend. "If you tell me something that I think the rest of the Order does not need to know, I will keep it quiet, but I have to know the truth," he said softly. "Had I known, I may have been able to help you and none of this would have happened."

George remained silent, but Fred looked up. He cast a guilty glance at his twin, who didn't look up at him, and said, "Shadow… He got the prophecy down."

Charlie closed his eyes. A laugh rose to his lips. "I should have known. All along he was hiding right under our noses. Severus is a tricky bastard."

"He was only protecting Harry," George cried, jumping to his feet and clenching his fists. "If anyone finds out, the Death Eaters will go mad trying to kill him. You can't tell anyone!"

"If the Death Eaters don't already know who Shadow is due to the debacle at the Department of Mysteries," Charlie scolded, "then I'm not likely to let them in on the secret. Now tell me what happened next."

George settled mutinously back into his chair as Fred and Ginny told the rest of the chaotic story. They had been separated at some points and between them they still couldn't account for all of Shadow's time, but then their stories came together again as they described taking shelter by the swamp in the amphitheater room.

Charlie was amazed as he listened to the description of Neville's power. He knew what they were describing: an Earth Elemental. He listened closely as they recounted Shadow’s behavior after Severus went through the veil, but they didn't have much to say. By that point, they had all been in shock and suffering.

"What was it like when he healed you?" he asked George.

"Like an overload," the twin answered softly, defeated. At least they had managed to keep Shadow's lynx Animagus form secret. "It was too much. Everything whited out and then I was on my hands and knees and nothing hurt. I tingled all over, but it wasn't a bad feeling exactly. Just overwhelming."

"And he asked you what hurt?"
"Yeah." George frowned and looked out the window. "I don't know what it means, but at the time I thought he was referring to Snape falling through the veil, so that's what I told him."

"Do you think he was possessed by something? The Dark Lord maybe?" Charlie pressed.

"No way." Fred shook his head sharply.

"The Dark Lord would never act like that," Ginny said with her new deeper voice. "I was possessed by him once, so I should know. And it wasn't like that at all."

"Okay." Charlie took her hand and rubbed it, his eyes softening. "Thank you. You guys helped me out a lot, and Harry, too."

"It's Shadow," George corrected, looking around at his older brother. "He's not Harry Potter. I don't think he was ever the Harry Potter we tried to make him out to be. He really is Shadow Snape now."

Charlie nodded, understanding the seriousness of his brother's statement. They would be making a mistake thinking about the Chosen One as the Gryffindor Harry Potter. That was obviously not who they were dealing with. He was a Snape through and through. Severus must have officially adopted him and now Harry was gone for good. They had to accept Shadow as he was or they'd fail whenever they tried to deal with him.

"Are you going to tell the Order?" George asked worriedly. "Because we know there's a good portion that wants to kill Shadow. Just because Moody's gone doesn't mean they don't still feel that way."

"How do you know about that?" Charlie frowned. He had thought the situation was being kept under wraps.

"We have our ways," Fred grinned slyly.

"Look. Mad-Eye had his faults," Charlie told them sternly, meeting their eyes, "but he didn't just die. You should remember that. He was murdered; Shadow killed him. I'm not saying what Moody was doing was right, but we don't know what's going on with Shadow and that's dangerous."

At the stricken looks on his sibling's faces, Charlie sighed and got to his feet. "I'm going to talk to Minerva. We'll decide what to do, but I don't think you should worry. Things have gotten a lot more dangerous with the Dark Lord out in the open. The more we can keep quiet about our advantages, the better, and Shadow is still the only one who can end this war. Now get some rest. Dad should be here soon and we'll have a big Christmas dinner."

"How's Ron?" Ginny asked before he could leave.

Charlie sighed and rubbed at his face. "He's going to live, but he's still very hurt. It's going to take some time before he's up and about. Poppy's not sure she can prevent scarring. She said thoughts burn worse than almost anything else."

Ginny nodded, trying to be brave, but her chin trembled. Fred wrapped an arm around her shoulders and George crawled across the bed to her other side so she was sandwiched between them.

Confident that they would take care of each other, Charlie softly shut the door behind him. Kingsley was waiting for him in the hall, and together they made their way to where Minerva was recovering. They had some decisions to make and an active war to prepare for.

xXx
It was about one o’clock in the afternoon, about seven hours since they had portkeyed back to Snape House. Severus was in Shadow’s bed, propped up on pillows and drifting between coherency and insensibility, while Draco sat next to him in a chair drawn up to the bedside, feeding him healing and stimulant potions and making sure he didn’t fall asleep. They were both dirty, but wet cloths and a few well-placed cleaning charms had gotten rid of most of the grime and dust.

Omi popped in and out, but he was careful not to go too near Seraphim. The alter reacted quite violently to anyone getting too close and it seemed that this included elves. Omi was bewildered but obedient. At least the alter had stopped sobbing. Seraphim sat in the corner, his back to a wall, his arms propped up on his bent knees. He was silent and withdrawn, watching everything through blank green eyes.

Severus was in one of his more coherent states and had been for the last ten minutes. Draco, exhausted, hoped that meant his vigil was almost over. As if reading his thoughts - and perhaps he was - the Potions Master said, "Thank you, Draco. I feel much more like myself."

Draco nodded, unsure what to say to that.

"Why do you suppose Shadow does not return?" he continued, finally feeling like he might actually be able to comprehend the answers to his many questions now.

"I don't think Shadow wants to come back. He thinks you're dead," Draco said, yawning against his will.

"I see," Severus murmured and hooked his still greasy hair behind his ear. "I can remedy that, I believe. But before I do, I want to know what happened. Tell me everything you know."

Adrenaline pumped into Draco's veins as he realized just how much he had to explain.

Severus saw the reaction and frowned. "Draco. I'm waiting."

Hands trembling on the armrests, Draco told him about Demon awakening due to the Dark Lord using a Killing Curse and how the Vengeance Ritual had brought him to the scene as the alter tortured Lockhart.

"You did what?" Severus demanded icily, his eyes as hard as obsidian as they took in the wincing teen.

Draco leaned away, cowering in his seat. "I activated the spirit portkey," he repeated faintly. "It combined Boy and Demon. Salazar thinks it's permanent."

"What else did Salazar tell you?" Severus asked with mock sweetness, his hands bloodless around the blanket they gripped.

Draco really, really didn't want to tell his teacher about Demon being a semi-Horcrux. Closing his eyes, he could only do so in a faint whisper.

Severus exploded out of the bed and towered over the teen. "WHAT?"

Seraphim growled from his corner. He’d gone from a sitting position to crotched on the balls of his feet. His eerie green eyes stared unblinking as the almost animalistic sound vibrated through his chest. Seeing the dried bloody tear tracks down his son's face softened his fury. Stiffly, he backed away from Draco. The blond smiled with bitter irony that Seph had saved him yet again.

"What happened next?" he demanded, voice clipped.
Draco was too exhausted to be afraid any longer. Almost apathetically he explained that the Ministry was now after the Dark creature and that the Order was after both Draco and Shadow for answers. Severus didn't say anything to this, just stood there and smoldered. Draco continued and described the letter from his mother, how they sent Longbottom to warn the Order, and finally recounted everything that happened at the Department of Mysteries.

The only thing he left out was the shocking kiss he had shared with his best friend. Remembering made his stomach flutter pleasantly and an unavoidable smile touch his lips even now. It was something he wanted to keep to himself for a little longer and cherish. He had never thought Shadow would make the first move, let alone in such a stunning manner. Closing his eyes, Draco could still feel the weight of Shadow's tongue in his mouth, the texture and taste of it…

Severus's cold, cruel voice shattered his pleasant half-dream. "I leave you alone for only a few days and my son's cover is blown, his life endangered by his enemies, and the Order no longer offers him some semblance of protection! Well done, Draco. If your goal is to kill my son, you've been doing absolutely wonderfully!"

"Leave him alone," Seraphim ordered lowly, getting to his feet and glowering dangerously at the irate man.

Severus masked his furious expression and forced control over himself. It was exceedingly difficult. His heart was racing and his mind was on fire with everything he had learned. How could things go so wrong in only a few days? Breathing deeply through his nose, Severus forced himself to lock away his emotions in Occlumency pools. It was hard. The near death experience had worn away his self-composure and left him raw and volatile.

After a few minutes, he felt more in control of himself and he took in the situation with clearer eyes. Draco was nearing the point of fainting from both stress and exhaustion. He looked a mess. There was a grey tint to his skin, a dullness to his eyes, and Severus realized just how close to breaking the blond was.

"I apologize," he murmured, holding the Slytherin's gaze. "You have been placed in untenable positions. I am aware that you would not jeopardize Shadow willingly. It is extremely fortunate that you kept the Ministry from realizing the Dark creature was Shadow and prevented your father from getting the prophecy." Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to admit the truth. "I am equally at fault for the position we now find ourselves in for not being available when you needed me."

Draco gaped at him. He could remember a time when his Head of House would not have been caught dead apologizing for anything, let alone willingly accepting blame. "Sir? Can I ask how you knew where to find us? And did you get the Horcrux?"

Severus came forward and gently guided Draco into the bed he had so recently abandoned. The fact that the usually fiercely independent blond let him do this told him volumes about Draco's mental and physical state. Severus felt a pang of worry for the teen as Draco's eyes closed before he was even horizontal.

"Black and I returned here from the cave and Omi told us your location," Severus told him softly. "He overheard your plans regarding the Ministry and was worried. As for the Horcrux, we'll discuss it later. Don't think on it now. Just rest."

Draco nodded slightly and was instantly asleep.

Severus turned to his son. The alter stared at him through venomous green eyes. The hoodie he wore was torn and dirty, his pants were ruined, his shoes were worse, his hair was in disarray, and blood
was smeared across his face from his scalp, eyes, and nose. There were a few areas where his clothes were charred, revealing first degree or second degree burns on the pale skin underneath.

Severus took a step forward, but the teen's whole body tensed and he raised his fists before him in warning. Severus paused and considered his next move. The fact that this Seraphim alter had pulled him from the veil, possibly permanently expending all his massive amounts of magic to do so, made him feel oddly indebted, but he also wanted Shadow back with him. Severus forced himself to concentrate, finding it surprisingly hard to do so, and tried to reach his son with his mind.

The alter jerked his head away violently and practically snarled as rage ignited in his maddened eyes. "Get away from me!"

"Please, forgive me," Severus said soothingly, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "I should have warned you."

"I will hurt you," Seraphim warned him darkly.

"I believe you," Severus reassured and took a large step backward. The alter seemed to relax a bit at that. "Aren't you tired? I just thought I'd help you get back to sleep."

Seraphim stared at the man. He didn't know him, trust him, or like him. He was a stranger, but his death would cause him pain because it would cause his other pain. Knowing this made him very edgy. He felt every moment that his magic was not there to defend or heal him, and how could he defend against a person he couldn't kill anyway? He didn't like being helpless. He hated it, in fact. And that's exactly what he was right now against this man.

"I won't hurt you," Severus coaxed, still staying far back. "I owe you my life. It obliges me to protect and guard you to the best of my ability. That's what I'm trying to do. Help you."

Seraphim cocked his head. He had never imagined such a thing; that someone else would protect him. He didn't believe it for a second of course, but it was an interesting concept. Although… Draco had once protect him, hadn't he? … From the three who had hurt him most. He had been only a Boy at the time and rendered defenseless with absolute terror when the blond had come and made them all disappear into black smoke.

"Don't you want to sleep?" Severus asked, distracting the alter from his distressed thoughts.

"No," Seraphim growled. "I'm going to stay and make sure we never get hurt again," he vowed, looking back at the man, insanity twisting his face into a manic smile.

Severus paled. This was the moment he had feared as soon as he learned of Harry Potter having Dissociative Identity Disorder. Of all the case studies he had read, it was very rare to find a person with separate identities working to the benefit of the whole. More commonly, the alters would war against each other for dominance, often sabotaging and suppressing their counterparts as much as they could. Desperate, still shaken from nearly dying, Severus flung his mind forward in a last attempt to wake his son.

Seraphim tossed his head back like a wild horse and cried out furiously before spinning around and bolting out the door. Severus chased after him. Seeing this, Seraphim truly panicked. He was defenseless and was being hunted! He saw the staircase and sprinted down them three at a time, hoping it would slow his pursuer.

Panting, terrified, his eyes darted around frantically, looking for anything to protect himself with. Phantom pains lashed across his skin as memories of past punishments haunted him. He bolted
across the room and flung himself at the door. It opened to the outside! Crying out with joy, Seraphim dove over the threshold and sprinted across the snow-covered ground.

"Seraphim! Wait!" Severus called, frantic. He watched his son disappear into the woods and panic overwhelmed him. He stumbled forward, the leg that was injured by Dumbledore almost giving out under his weight.

What had he been thinking? How could he attack the skittish alter? Now he had lost his son! Gasping, heart racing, Severus's vision faded in and out, the ground tipped sideways under his feet. He tried to fight his body's weakness, but the stress was too much. He fainted, still reaching out for his son, and fell limply onto his side in the snow.

xXx

Neville wasn't nearly as sick as he was when Demon woke to go after Lockhart. It seemed Boy's magic softened the effect of Demon’s. He still wasn't well when he was taken to an emptied sitting room and seated on a couch. Charlie, Shacklebolt, and a pale-faced McGonagall stood in front of him and made it clear he wasn't leaving the room without giving them answers.

"How did you know the Death Eaters would go after the prophecy?" Shacklebolt asked calmly, his voice as steady and patient as the earth. Resisting was futile. Neville might as well give in because Shacklebolt never would.

"What happened to Shadow down there, Mr. Longbottom? Why didn't he recognize his father and why would he hurt you?" McGonagall asked sternly, leaning on the black cane in front of her with both hands. The fact that she was injured and obviously in pain was geared to make him feel guilty that he was forcing her to stand there. If he told her, she could rest.

"He's in danger, Neville," Charlie coaxed. By talking, Neville wouldn't be hurting his friend, he'd be helping him. "The Death Eaters may know who he is now and start looking for him. He needs our help; Severus might be too injured to protect him."

Any normal fifteen-year-old would have caved to any one of the three pressures. The fact that all three were being put in play should have ensured they would receive answers, but Neville sat calmly before them. His back was straight and his eyes were completely clear. Clammy sweat glistened on his pale face, but his hands were steady and folded casually in his lap.

"Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall snapped, raising an eyebrow. "I hope you realize that you are abetting an underage minor in illegal pursuits."

"A hearing at the Ministry will only be the beginning, young man," Shacklebolt drawled. "Would he really want that for you?"

"Neville, please, you have no idea what's going on. It might even be too late," Charlie cried urgently. "He could be under attack right now! You need to tell us where they are."

Neville closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The idea of going before the Wizengamot frightened him, but the idea that Shadow could be hurt was worse. Shadow was the first person to see his pain, the first person to reach out to him. No one understood the impact that had on him.

He had lived in utter isolation. His view of the world and himself had been so twisted that hurting himself, bleeding himself, had seemed reasonable. His world was so dark that death had seemed like a solution. That darkness of spirit was worse than destructive; it was a poisonous spiritual prison of despair and depression. Shadow had been the one to unlock the door and help him learn to step free
of that torturous life. Neville owed his very happiness and sense of belonging to his brother. That was what bound them so tightly.

"I certainly don't want to go to prison, but … I will." Neville opened his dark brown eyes, resolute. "I believe Shadow is safe where he is and with people who will help him. You cannot make me betray him."

"It wouldn't be betraying him," Charlie said gently. He walked over and sat next to the teen. Neville didn't look over at him, afraid he'd give in. "It would be helping him. We aren't the enemy, Nev. We're his friends."

"He doesn't seem as concerned for you as you are of him," Shacklebolt said, his voice hard. "Remember that before you throw your life away for him."

"At least tell us how you knew the Death Eaters were going to go after the prophecy," Charlie pleaded. "Give us something, so we can keep the Ministry at bay."

"I don't know anything," Neville protested, flushed with nerves. He looked between the adults but saw no escape.

"Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said coolly. "I am severely disappointed in you. It is your duty as the heir to the Longbottom name to aid the Light and with your silence you help the Dark."

"Fine," Shacklebolt sneered. "Have it your way. Don't tell us where your friend is. But explain to us why he would murder an Order member in cold blood! Unless he had some bloody good explanation, that is a capital offense!"

"No!" Neville cried and then hastily clamped his mouth shut. They were trying to trick him!

"What happened to him?" McGonagall pressed. "Is he under a spell?"

"We're trying to protect him," Charlie exclaimed, frustrated. "You can help him and you won't!"

Neville shook his head sharply and refused to speak.

"Nothing to say, Longbottom?" Shacklebolt leaned forward, so they were looking eye to eye. "Then how about you explain your own display of magic, hmmm?"

"How long have you known you were an Earth Elemental?" Charlie asked more gently. "That must have been an incredibly difficult time for you."

Neville ducked his head and closed his eyes. He felt dizzy and sick and his anxiety didn't help matters. What was he supposed to say? What wouldn't get him in trouble or hurt Shadow? Confused, he decided it was best not to say anything at all. He desperately wished his brother were here to help him or even Draco. The Slytherin would know how to handle the Order.

The interrogation lasted almost two hours with Charlie acting nice and pleading, McGonagall wielding guilt, and Shacklebolt pressing hard with threats. They asked about the past summer, the graveyard, Shadow, his source in the Death Eaters, Severus, and his own powers. They threatened to expel him from Hogwarts, put him on trial at the Ministry, charge him with conspiracy, and worse. They also promised to give him medals, money, and recognition if he cooperated. With every moment that passed, he grew more confused, more panicked. He was shaking by this point and had thrown up twice from nerves.

"Please, I can't tell you, I'm sorry!" he cried desperately, finally breaking his silence. He felt so sick
and just wanted it all to stop!

Suddenly the door was thrown open and Augusta Longbottom stepped into the room. Charlie had to put a restraining hand on Kingsley's shoulder to keep him from attacking the woman. They had been so close to getting Neville to talk!

"I hope I'm interrupting," the old matriarch said coldly. "Neville is my ward and still a minor. It's illegal to question him without me. If this is an example of the respect you give Order members, I resign from my position."

"Augusta, surely you understand the importance..." McGonagall began reasonably.

"I understand my grandson is sick and you are treating him like a prisoner," Mrs. Longbottom countered with a sniff. She went straight to Neville's side and helped him stand. The shaking teen wiped at his face, erasing his tears with an embarrassed blush. "We are leaving and we won't be coming back."

The Triad said nothing as the woman left with her grandson. Neville smiled at her, half-dazed that she had come, but she frowned at him in answer. Without a word, she took him straight to the floo. They stepped out of the fireplace at home and she put him firmly on the couch. Neville stared up at her dazed. It felt like he had never left the interrogation room.

"This is the second time I've had to intervene on your behalf, Neville," she said sternly, putting her hands on her hips. "You tell me to send Mr. Lupin to the Ministry after you if you weren't back in two hours, and now I find you being interrogated by the Order. Just what are you up to, young man? I tried to give you some freedom now that you are finally showing promise, but I'm not going to let you drag our name through the mud!"

"I'm sorry, Gran," Neville answered softly. He felt tears burn his eyes as her disapproval. Maybe her approval and pride had been a dream? Trembling, he clenched his fists on his knees and spoke barely above a whisper. "I promise that I'm fighting for the Light. I'm not doing anything to dishonor the Longbottom name."

"You were caught breaking into the Ministry! This isn't a dishonor?" she demanded furiously. "Having the Order doubt you? Forcing my hand so that I must quit my position? How is this bringing honor to your parents?"

"I didn't mean for you to do that," he answered softly, his shoulders slumped.

"This is because of that Snape boy, isn't it?" she guessed shrewdly. "I knew the moment I saw him that that boy would be in the thick of things. He has the mark of fate about him, but I expected you to handle him with some modicum of sense, Neville! Support him, but you must also keep your distance! Destiny is never an easy mistress to please."

"I'm sorry," Neville answered, cowed.

"Get to bed. You look wretched."

Neville watched his grandmother march into the kitchen. "Thank you for coming for me," he called after her.

The woman either didn't hear or didn't care to respond. Sighing, he forced himself to stand and move his aching body upstairs to his room. It took him almost twenty minutes. He fell twice - severely bruising his knees in the process - but he finally reached his bed. Collapsing on the mattress, he covered his face and gulped back tears.
"Happy Christmas to me," he muttered thickly, despondent, before falling into a deep and troubled sleep.

xXx

Expectations for Christmas dinner at Grimmauld Place were low. The house was only half-decorated, most of the Order was either on watch throughout England or at home recovering, and fear of the war and grief over those they had already lost hung heavy in the air. But as the few remaining Order members gathered around the table, they were reminded that not all magic came from a wand.

Molly Weasley practically lit up the room as she hovered the feast she had spent all day cooking onto the table. Arthur, still bandaged but looking healthy, sat at the head of the table with a wide smile and complimented his wife, who blushed and kissed his head fondly. The twins were teasing the aged Ginny, while Bill playfully wrapped his arm around her shoulders and said he got his own twin for Christmas.

At first, Charlie held himself apart, but soon his whole countenance melted as he lightheartedly debated with his father about the purpose of a Muggle rubber duck. Molly admonished them all to behave and eat their dinners, but she was smiling around the table with bright eyes. Soon, before they knew it, Tonks and Hermione were pulled into the merry conversation, McGonagall began to recall past Christmases with a gently smiling Shacklebolt, and Remus and Sirius began arguing about pranks with the twins.

The air slowly transformed into something warm and golden. Christmas may have arrived late, but come it did. They ate a spectacular meal, had two servings of delicious desserts, and then went into the sitting room where they opened presents. The most memorable was Hermione's delicate diamond necklace that Viktor gave her, which Ginny teased her mercilessly about. Others gifts included the prank book from Sirius for the twins, the dog bone for Sirius from Santa, and the beautiful peridot earrings for Tonks from Remus. Laughter softened the atmosphere and for a few hours the darkness was pushed away.

Before bed, the Weasley clan and Hermione went up to Ron's bedroom. The redhead was woken by Poppy and he smiled tiredly at his family. They talked quietly, giving him support and love. He was even able to open his presents with their help. Poppy smiled at the touching scene, but she had to ask them to leave after an hour when tension lines appeared on her patient's face.

Molly shooed everyone out and they made their way back downstairs, Arthur recommending hot chocolate for all of them. Hermione begged off, feeling tired, still not fully healed. Fred went up with her, but the others sat around the twinkling tree and drank cocoa, talking softly. Remus sat on the floor, his back against the couch with Tonks in his lap. Molly and Arthur sat next to each other, Molly's head on her husband's shoulder. Their children lay in a sprawled together in a heap, happy and content.

McGonagall smiled, tears burning her eyes as she watched from a recliner. This was exactly what she was fighting so hard to protect. "Christmas was good this year," she said softly.

Shacklebolt put his hand on her shoulder, standing beside her chair. "Yes, it was."

No one noticed Sirius missing.

xXx

Sirius threw the heavy box to the side. He'd gone through everything. It wasn't up here. "Where else
"What are you doing up here?" George asked as he popped his head into the room. He sneezed at all the disturbed dust and looked around dubiously. "Have you been up here all night?"

"I'm looking for something," Sirius explained tiredly. He rubbed at his face, his long scraggly black hair dust-streaked.

"Yeah… I can see that." George grinned wryly and pulled himself the rest of the way into the attic. He crouched by the defeated man, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Need some help?"

"Where's your brother?"

"Getting dressed for breakfast. I was sent to find you."

"Breakfast, huh?" Sirius smiled crookedly. "Coffee sounds real good right now."

"What are you looking for?" George asked again, looking down at the prank master with suddenly serious eyes. "Really. I can help. My brother and me, we've explored this place up and down over the summer. Maybe I've seen whatever it is."

"A silver locket with small emeralds," Sirius answered slowly. He flashed a grin and gave a barking laugh. "It was just something of my mother's. Got to thinking about it because of the holiday. Wondered if it was still here, is all."

George didn't buy that for a second, but nodded. "And it's not up here?"

"No." Sirius wiped at his face and stood. "I think I remember my brother, Regulus, having it last. I checked his room, but it wasn't there. I thought maybe…" He gestured around at all the disturbed boxes and trunks.

"I haven't seen it, but I'll keep my eyes open."

"Thanks." Sirius clapped him on the shoulder, making George stagger slightly. "Now about that breakfast you promised me…"

George laughed and followed the Animagus down from the attic, but he wasn't going to forget about that locket. He was far from stupid and knew that Shadow needed it for some reason. That was good enough for him. Besides, a treasure hunt would be just the thing to lift Fred's spirits.

xXx

Seraphim was cold. It painfully permeated his body and he curled up more tightly in the hollow tree he had found. Faint tremors ran through his muscles and his eyes stung. It had been hours with no relief.

He had walked through the quiet wood until his feet began to hurt, soaked through with snow. He found the tree and, at first, curling up inside had warmed him, but then night fell and it got colder and colder. Whimpering, he shook and chattered. There was no magic to help him. Stiff… numb… cold… helpless…

First, he stretched his hoodie over his knees. It felt like this might work, but then it didn't. The cold seeped right on through. Then he worked his hands up and down his arms; blew his stuttering breath over his fingers. His core temperature dropped and his breath failed to warm them. His hands grew numb until he could no longer feel them. The panic attack built slowly as one thing after another
failed to work to warm him up, and then the flashbacks had come.

"You filthy ingrate! I put a roof over your head! I protect you from the gutter rats, and you have the nerve to be ungrateful?" Vernon roared. He yanked off his belt and whipped him across his face. The pain exploded in his mouth and cheek, turning his vision white and a scream from his throat.

"Do you have a birthday? Freaks like you, Boy, they don't have birthdays!"

"I'm sorry!" Seraphim cried out, trembling. "I'm sorry, Uncle!"

Vernon snarled and raised the belt again.

Seraphim jerked back and struck his head against the tree. The real pain brought the cold and the woods back into view. Uncle Vernon was gone. But red… red blood was on the snow… his blood. Frantic, Seraphim brought his numb hands to his face, but his lips were not cut open, his cheek was not flayed. Gasping, sobbing, terrified, he looked again and the snow was white in the moonlight.

Then he remembered. Uncle Vernon was dead. DEAD! He would never hurt Seraphim again. But the cold was. The cold was hurting him, and he didn't know how to stop it. The magic was gone. Keening, he curled up.

"Make him beg!" The snake-man laughed. "I don't hear him begging."

His pelvic bone shattered with a disgusting cracking noise. Large splinters pierced though his skin and carved through the highly-sensitive groin nerves. Agony sheared his world in two; it was so great he could not even scream, reduced to a gibbering, drooling wreck.

Warmth touched his face and he flinched, a scream ripping from his throat as he broke free from the flashback. He was in the tree. The faceless men were not there. The wands weren't there. The sun was rising. Seraphim looked into the light, his eyes wild. The warmth hurt as the cold was forced to release its deathly hold.

But the cold was what really hurt him, not the warmth. Warmth was good. It was all he had been able to think about for hours and hours as the snow and ice bit at him. It was what would make the pain stop. So why did it hurt? Confused, afraid to stay curled up with the flashbacks, he crawled out of his hole and into the sun. It stung and he cried. Why did it have to hurt him, too? Everything hurt him. Even the cold and the sun. There were no people and still it hurt. The magic was gone.

He could go to sleep. He could go away from all this and leave it behind. Seraphim shook his head. No. Then his Other would be awake and could get hurt. The Other could call him back. He'd have to face the hurt again. If he stayed, he could make sure he never hurt. That they never hurt.

"Sit on my lap," Lockhart said with an eager smile, his large hand reaching for him.

Seraphim was trapped in a body that inexplicably obeyed. It was like he was locked in a puppet. He sat in the man's lap and felt the erection against his back as he was pulled tightly against the man's chest and hips. One of Lockhart's arms pinned him in place, the other came around to fondle him. They were both panting.

Seraphim moaned, though he didn't know why, and lay his head back on Lockhart's shoulder, closing his eyes. He couldn't feel the pleasure - that was Shadow's to remember - so he was trapped inside a body with no understanding of why it was reacting the way it was. His behavior was baffling and infuriating! Why couldn't he move? Why was he making those noises, encouraging the worm behind him?
"Yes… So good. You are so… so good…" Lockhart panted in his ear, rocking against his back and ass for friction.

"Feels good…” Seraphim's voice slurred in answer as the man continued to rub between Seph’s legs.

Yanking free of the memory, he flung himself away and brought his numb, useless hands up, snarling and ready to fight to the death. He'd rip the man's face off with his nails and teeth if he had to! But he was alone again, lying on his back in the snow, the morning sun falling on his face, the woods silent.

"No, no, no! I won't be tricked!" he yelled. He had KILLED HIM! And he wouldn't let the snow trick him, too. He was smarter than that. He wasn't Boy any longer. The cold wanted him to believe the warmth was bad, but it was really the cold. He'd get warm, no matter how much it might seem like it hurt!

Staggering to his feet, falling to his knees twice, Seraphim forced himself to walk. He couldn't feel his feet. It was like his legs ended somewhere below the knee. They were invisible, but he knew they were there because he could hear the crunch of snow under each numb step.

He made a meandering, snaking progress through the woods. His hands tingled and then they prickled. A sharp, piercing sensation followed. Seraphim laughed. He wasn't going to believe it! He wasn't going to be tricked by the cold!

"I told you to stay out there, Boy! You think you can just sneak inside, you bastard?" Vernon hissed threateningly. He grabbed Seraphim by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

"…P-ple-a-s-s-s-s-e… It's-s-s c-c-c-c-old…" he begged pitifully.

"You worthless freak!" Vernon flung him several feet and he fell painfully back into the snow-coated yard. "Go wait for me behind the shed!

The man disappeared and Seraphim scurried across the yard, frozen and desperately hungry. He waited, rocking and crying softly, hoping beyond hope that he'd be spared since he had obeyed and was waiting like he had been told. Vernon's heavy tread could be heard coming across the snow toward him, the ominous crunch sending shivers of terror down her spine. The giant of a man came around the corner holding a red hot poker.

"You scream and I'll cut your tongue out, Boy," the man threatened, his eyes glittering murderously. "Next time you'll do as you're told. You'll not spread your filthy lies about my family ever again!"

Seraphim stuffed a fist into his mouth as his Uncle raised the poker high and brought it down. He arched, writhing in agony as the bar pierced his right shoulder and pinned him to the ground. He passed out as a wave of agony crashed over his head, the smell of his sizzling flesh filling his nose, but he had not screamed. He had kept his tongue.

Gagging, Seraphim took his fist out of his mouth and looked around. He was on the ground again, but the poker wasn't there. He remembered having to pull himself up the bar, almost all the way to the top - still pierced through - before he could get the leverage to yank himself free. He was desperately glad he didn't have to do it again. But at least then the magic had come and the pain had gone away for a little while. But there was no more magic. And he was cold and still extremely hungry.

He didn't know how long he walked, but the sky was bright and the sun was high when he broke free of the woods and saw it. There was a town. It was a big one. He could hear it from here.
Seraphim plodded obsessively forward. Warmth. Food. He would have both.

xXx

Draco was the first to wake Saturday afternoon. He felt sore and tired, but he couldn't sleep any longer. He had to move. Getting up, he took a long bath and borrowed some more of Shadow's clothes. He didn't understand Shadow's fondness for Muggle T-shirts and jeans. Slacks were much more comfortable and T-shirts were just hideous, but he found black pants as well as a nice blue cashmere sweater.

Looking in the mirror, he decided he looked presentable. After one last run through with the comb, he went in search of his friend. It didn't take him long to look throughout the house and discover that Shadow was missing.

"Severus!" he called frantically.

"Master needs his rest!" Omi cried, appearing before the man's door with his arms spread. He had been beside himself with worry when he found his Master unconscious in the cold snow yesterday and had quickly put him to bed. "You not disturb him!"

"Move, elf!" Draco growled warningly. "He needs to know Shadow's gone!"

Omi looked torn and that hesitation gave Draco the opening he needed to rush past the elf and bang on the door. It was yanked open a minute later and Severus glared at him out of a pale face. He was leaning heavily against the doorjamb, his leg still not accepting all his weight. Draco ignored this and exclaimed that Shadow was missing.

Severus jerked and limped quickly from his room, moving toward the front door. "Omi! Do you sense Shadow anywhere near?"

"No, Master. He came home feeling different; I cannot sense him," the elf answered immediately, following after Severus and Draco as the two rushed forward.

Severus flung open the door and cursed loudly. New snow had fallen and Seraphim's tracks were long gone.

"Why would he leave?" Draco asked softly, fretting.

Severus snarled, hating the guilt that flashed through him, and slammed the door. Without a word, he turned and moved toward his lab. He'd need a potion to enhance the tracking spell he intended to use. Thank Merlin Shadow was his biologically now. The altered psychological state wouldn't interfere with a Blood-Tracking Spell.

"What are we going to do?" Draco pressed, still following the man.

Severus spun around, his eyes blazing. "We are going to do nothing. You are going to stay here and out of trouble; you've caused enough as it is. I am going to find my son."

Draco stood still in the middle of the hallway, shocked, and then rage rushed up from his stomach. "Don't blame this on me! You're the one who wasn't here!" he yelled at the man's back.

Severus spun around, his cloak flaring up behind him. "Don't blame you, Draco?" he purred threateningly, stalking forward. "Who else am I to blame for the utterly imbecilic plan to rush headlong into the abandoned Ministry knowing the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters would be making an appearance? Only a child would be so naïve as to think it possible to avoid the inevitable
confrontation such an action would provoke!"

"And what would you have done, then?" Draco screamed furiously right into the man's face.

"I would have told the Order and had them stall, or I would have anonymously tipped off the Ministry! They do have capable weapons, especially in the Department of Mysteries! Anything would have been better than following your plan and becoming sacrificial lambs to be slaughtered, you useless boy!"

Stung, hurt, Draco sneered nastily. "I'm useless? I'm not the one who left Shadow outside all night, possibly to freeze to death!"

The blond staggered back as Severus struck him with all his strength. Hand burning, Severus stared at the panting Slytherin through narrowed eyes. He felt cold panic clutch at his chest. Memories of his abusive Muggle father flashed through his mind, as well as the certain knowledge that Shadow would never understand or forgive him had he witnessed the unintentional action.

"I'm sorry, sir," Draco said quietly. He lowered his hand from his face and kept his eyes submissively on the floor. "I was out of line."

Severus could hardly move, could hardly talk. The teen's apology cut at him. "Stay here. In case he comes back," he said tightly and forced himself to turn and continue on to his lab.

Draco watched him go, his cheek on fire.

xXx

Seraphim passed several rows of houses and a few stores. People were walking about or could be heard in the buildings. He tried to avoid them as much as possible, but a few noticed him. One woman even tried to approach, worry in her face, but Seraphim had met the woman's eyes and she had fled. Reassured, Seraphim continued forward.

Now he found himself in front of a house that had no vehicles out front and no noise coming from inside. He looked through the windows, his feet in agony. He saw no one; the house was empty. He tried the front door, the back door; they were both locked. Inside it was warm. He knew that, but all he could think of to do was break a window. That would hurt.

Seraphim slowly came to a strange understanding. Sometimes hurt was unavoidable when trying to meet a higher goal. He needed to get warm; he needed food. He would have to hurt himself to get those things. A little pain - small in comparison to what he had already gone through - had to be borne to cure the larger pain. He remembered Draco asking him to make a small cut so that they could escape the bigger threat. He hadn't understood at the time, but he was beginning to.

Resolute, he moved forward and punched a hole in the window with his half-numb hand. The window shattered and glass cut his fist and the back of his wrist. Seraphim cradled the hand to his chest, trying to stop the bleeding. There was still glass in the window. With his good hand, he clumsily picked free the larger pieces from the frame and then pulled himself through. Glass cut his cheek, shoulder, both knees, but as soon as he was in the house he was embraced by warmth.

Trembling, Seraphim pulled the drapes closed on the broken window, hoping it would keep the heat in. He moved over to the couch and pulled the blanket there around his shoulders. He staggered to the kitchen and grabbed a hand towel, wrapping up his hand. He basically collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table and cried out with relief as he got off his painful feet.

There was a bowl of fruit and candy on the table. Seraphim used his good hand to pull the food
closer to him. He grabbed the chocolate first since that was easier to eat. Then he quickly ate a banana and an orange, tears running down his face all the while as his fingers and toes painfully defrosted. He was just about ready to get up and get a glass of water when he heard the sound of a car outside.

Seraphim jumped to his feet, leaving the blanket behind. A muffled cry escaped his throat, but he ignored the pain and moved toward the counter. He looked around frantically and then he saw it. He rushed over and grabbed the large kitchen knife just as the kitchen door swung open and two uniformed men barged into the room wielding short clubs.

"Police," yelled the first man. He was tall and broad shouldered; his eyes were hard.

"Drop the knife! Put your hands up where we can see them!" the smaller one ordered.

Snarling, Seraphim limped backward until he hit the counter. He held the knife before him in both hands, trying to keep it steady. "Leave me alone!" he screamed wildly. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!"

"A druggie," the first said, disgusted.

"What do we do?" the smaller one asked, head tilted to the side, his expression softening.

"You go around that side; I'll come in from the left. Distract him and I'll grab him," the big man decided.

Following the plan, they went opposite ways around the table, their clubs out before them. The smaller man alternated between soothing sounds and reasonable demands. Seraphim's eyes danced wildly between the two men.

"Don't! I said leave me alone! I'll kill you!" he raged, slashing the knife out at the larger man and then the smaller.

"Whoa!"

"I wouldn't do that again, punk, if I were you!"

"Frank, wait! He's just a kid!"

Seraphim leapt as soon as the smaller man lowered his weapon, his attention turned sideways to his larger partner. The man screamed as the knife stabbed down into his chest and they both toppled over. Seraphim grinned as hot blood welled and speckled his face as he yanked the knife free. Elated, he laughed. He was no longer defenseless. Even without magic he could protect himself. The officer gurgled under him, his arms and hands spasming.

"You bloody bastard!" Frank yelled furiously. He swung his club around and connected with the distracted teen's head.

Seraphim's vision went dark. He blindly lifted the bloody knife as he fell against the cupboards. Panicked, blind, dizzy, Seraphim wanted to kill the man who hurt him, but getting away without further damage was more important. Seraphim pulled himself to his feet and slowly stumbled to the kitchen door. The policeman called for him to stop, but Seraphim slashed out toward the voice viciously.

There was a thump and a sizzling sound. Seraphim had jerked out of the way just in time as the man fired his taser gun. His vision was coming back in splotches, and Seraphim saw the electric sparks coming from the pronged weapon now embedded in the kitchen door. He snarled. The man paled
and stepped fearfully back, his club held tightly in his hand.

Seraphim was furious, but the room was whirling around and he could hardly stand. Turning, he ran. The front door was open and he bolted outside. The cold hit him like a slap in the face, but he barely acknowledged it. All he could think about was fleeing. Nausea rolled through him and he vomited everything he had just eaten. As soon as he was able, he continued his terrified run. He was very careful to keep a firm grip on the knife.

xXx

Narcissa stepped lightly on slippered feet into the room her husband had been granted. The beautiful white robes she wore trailed along behind her. Crystal clear winter sunlight filled the room and made her porcelain skin glow. Her long blonde hair sat in an intricate, braided bun on the back of her head. A few long wisps framed her cold, beautiful face.

She sat gracefully in a tall-backed chair placed by the bedside. Carelessly, she moved a sweaty strand of hair from her husband's eyes. Lucius groaned, his face twisting with pain. He had finally been released from punishment this morning and had yet to regain consciousness. Even in his sleep, he grimaced and whimpered with agony. Narcissa regarded him with her cool grey eyes for a moment and then turned her attention to the paper she had brought with her to read.

**He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named Returns**

*In a brief statement Friday, this past Christmas night, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned to this country and is active once more.*

"It is with great regret that I must confirm that the wizard styling himself Lord - well, you know who I mean - is alive and among us again," said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters. "It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the Dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry's employ. We believe that the Dementors are currently taking direction from Lord - Thingy..."

She skimmed the rest of the article, looking for truth and things she did not know. She was pleased to see that the Daily Prophet wasn't so cowardly as to not mention the recent slurs on Potter's sanity. The reporter wrote that the boy was "...a lone voice of truth... perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in his story... forced to bear ridicule and slander..." It also reprinted the letter Potter wrote that had appeared in the Quibbler months ago. But what really caught her interest was on page ten, near the very back of the paper.

**Accident At Ministry:**

**Shut Down Until Repairs Are Made**

It seemed that the two lower levels, floors eight and nine, of the Ministry had collapsed in a freak accident that Minister Fudge insists had nothing to do with Death Eaters or the Dark Lord. Narcissa knew differently however. In Lucius' more coherent moments, she had heard him curse and mutter about their son. She smiled coldly. The Death Eaters had not retrieved the prophecy. Her son had prevailed.

Reading further, she saw that it would take the Ministry at least two weeks before the building was fixed, which was about how long the Death Eaters needed to recover. The Inner Circle was either dead or injured from severe punishments, and those rescued from Azkaban would need at least that long to regain some sanity. However, she doubted that her sister would ever be normal again, no matter how much time was afforded her. Those who had Animagus abilities had fared better, like the
Lestrange brothers.

"Cissa," Lucius rasped, his blue eyes cracked open. He pushed his head into the pillow as pain gripped him. "Potion…"

Narcissa took the vial from the bedside table and brought it to her husband's lips. She wished it was poison, but the Dark Lord would be aware if any of his slaves died of unnatural causes, thus it was just a pain-relieving potion. Lucius drank it clumsily, spilling some down his chin. Disgusted, Narcissa pulled her wand from her robe and cleaned him. Lucius was too far gone to really notice.

"Where…?" he whispered dully, confused.

"Snape Castle," Narcissa answered.

The Dark Lord had taken great pleasure in occupying Severus's Muggle inheritance. He planned to take everything he could from Severus before killing him. It was the only thing fitting for a traitor. Snape Castle would be the last place anyone would think to look for the Dark Lord. It had the added bonus that Severus might accidentally wander by, not knowing he'd be walking straight into his enemies' hands. Narcissa knew better, however. Severus hated his Muggle father more than anything. He would never return willingly. Still, she should try to find a way around the spells that bound her to silence; Draco could make use of the information.

At first, she had been uncertain of the wisdom of her son defecting to the other side, but now she realized that Draco had seen the truth long before she had. Narcissa gave thanks every day that Draco had escaped the fate of becoming like his father. Even if the Light should lose, and they still might, she would rather see her only child dead than a twisted, broken, tainted shadow of himself. Now it was her mission to do all she could to see that the Light prevailed and her son survived.

xXx

Severus was exhausted. He had been Apparating around all day. It was nearing dusk, but he refused to go home until he had his son. The spell he was using only pointed him in the right direction, so he tried to triangulate the teen's location. He had finally narrowed it down to a large town about twenty-five miles from the house and had been wandering the streets, following the tug, ever since. It didn't help that Seraphim was obviously moving around.

He was not pleased in the least. For the last half-hour, he had progressively encroached deeper into the seedier section of town. Doors were propped closed, homeless people were huddled in doorways, and the sound of screaming couples and neglected infants could be heard from the street. Severus was certain that if the cold hadn't muffled the smell, he'd be submerged in the scent of trash, urine, and feces. This was no place for his son.

Turning the corner, a sneer curled permanently on his lip, Severus faced a dark alley. Barely two feet wide, he couldn't see the end, let alone the middle. Anything could be waiting down there, the dark shadows of dusk hiding any potential threat, but the spell insisted that his son lay somewhere past this obstacle. Hand tight on his wand, glad he had disillusioned himself long ago, Severus moved forward, only to freeze as a familiar growl reached his ears.

"Seraphim..." Severus called softly.

There was no answer. Heart pumping steadily, Severus calmly lifted his wand and cast a weak Lumos. The alley lit up under the white glow and he had to swallow a gasp. Seraphim sat huddled in the middle of the alley. He wore a stained and torn trench coat, obviously stolen from the corpse that lay near him. Not even the cold could erase the growing stench of decaying diseased flesh. The
teen's curls were matted on one side of his head with dried blood. His face was pale and his lips were blue. Two dull green eyes stared out at him; a bloody knife was clutched before him in a shaky grip.

"Seraphim," Severus tried again. "I've come to take you somewhere warm. There will be food and no one will hurt you there."

The teen blinked his green eyes but didn't respond. Severus took a chance and moved a half-step closer. Seraphim growled again and the knife lifted higher. Severus stopped and just regarded the boy. He was obviously ill, weak, and needed care. He couldn't imagine how hard this journey had been for him. He had to get him to come willingly. Forcing the alter would destroy his standing with the boy forever.

"Seraphim, do you remember Draco?"

Dull green eyes blinked and a frown tugged his lips down.

"Yes. Draco." Severus hoped he knew what he was doing. "I came looking for you because I was not sure he would be safe without you. Bad people are after him. They want to hurt him."

Without warning, Seraphim got to his feet. Severus had to force himself not to move forward and help steady the wavering teen. A single, blood-stained hand reached to brace himself on the wall; the knife held securely in the other. The trench coat hung off his slender frame and a disgusting smell wafted toward Severus with the movement.

"Draco," Seraphim said in a hoarse voice. His eyes were narrowed on Severus with obvious distrust.

"I can take you to him," Severus offered and reached forward his hand. "Just let me touch your sleeve and we will be gone from here."

Seraphim sneered. "Don't touch me."

Severus dropped his hand and forced calm and patience over his emotions. He had to let the alter decide on his own to trust him. A few minutes went by with Seraphim leaning on the filthy wall, shivering in his too-large coat. His head lowered to his chin with exhaustion and Severus could just make out the weak sound of the teen's teeth chattering. Severus forced himself to hold still.

Seraphim lifted his head, a smile tugging at his lips. He lifted the knife and pricked his finger. Severus's eyes widened as the teen touched the blood to his ring and whispered, "Take me home."

Chapter end.

A/N: Are my chapters too long? Would shorter chapters be easier to read?
Catching Up

Seraphim collapsed on the bedroom floor as soon as the portkey released him. His head swam and nausea welled in his throat. Sensing movement from the side, he slashed out with the knife, a snarl on his lips.

"Hey!" Draco cried out, astonished. "It's me!"

He had been sitting at the desk, staring out at the night when he heard Seraphim's entrance. He had been too shocked at the filthy condition of his friend to say anything, but the violent gesture with the knife got his attention. He stood slowly and frowned as the alter's green eyes narrowed with confusion. Then they opened wide and the alter was moving toward him quickly. Draco flinched back, away from the horrid smell and the blood-stained hand.

"Hurt," Seraphim rasped, ignoring the blond's reaction. It was what he expected from Boy. He gripped Draco’s hair firmly but gently at the back of his head.

Draco grimaced and tilted his head as the alter twisted his hair to get a better look at his bruised cheek. Draco had been distracted with worry and hadn't thought to put healing ointment on it. Seraphim touched it gently, aching with the need to heal it and unable to. This was his fault. He had sworn to protect Boy and he had left him in his panic.

"Sorry," Seraphim whispered, releasing the blond.

Draco stared into the green eyes of his friend and could almost feel the alter's guilt and sorrow. He'd had no idea just how much Seraphim worried about him. "I'm fine," he promised. He reached to wipe away the teen's tears without thinking and dropped his hand when the alter flinched away. "Really, Seph. I'm not hurt."

Seraphim shook his head hard. He would have time to feel bad about leaving Draco later. Right now he had to get them somewhere safe. He grabbed the blond's wrist and pulled him toward the door.

"Move," Seraphim growled.

Severus froze. He stared into his son's eyes and had no idea what to do or how to keep him here.

"Seph, wait." Draco stepped up to the alter's side, but he was careful not to get between him and the threat. "This is Shadow's father. Remember? Hurting him will hurt Shadow. That will hurt you. Please. I don't want you to get hurt. Put the knife down. Severus won't hurt you, I promise."

Seraphim frowned, obviously not happy. He glanced at the blond from the corner of his eye. "Make him move," he ordered.

Draco looked at Severus helplessly.

"It's cold outside," Severus said evenly, coming to the blond's aid. "The cold is very dangerous, Seraphim. It will hurt you and Draco. But it is warm here, is it not? And there is plenty of food. Please stay. I will not come near you."

Seraphim spun around and grabbed Draco by the upper arm. Jerking him forward, he grasped the blond's chin and showed Severus the bruise. Severus stood rigid, the blood draining from his face. "Look! We are not safe here. Someone hurt Draco," Seraphim growled. He released the blond and once again took a protective step forward, keeping Draco behind him. "Now move."

"I went outside!" Draco said hurriedly. "I was looking for you. I slipped in the snow. No one hurt me. Severus took care of me and said that I had to stay inside, that he would look for you so I wouldn't get hurt again."

Seraphim looked back with wide, wounded eyes. Draco winced, hating to lie, but knowing Seraphim would never stay if he thought they were in danger in the house. Severus stared at the blond over Seraphim's shoulder. He did not deserve the reprieve Draco afforded him, but he'd make it up to the blond somehow.

"Fine." Seraphim finally relented. He looked back at Severus and pointed the knife warningly. "Stay away from us."

Severus bowed his head in acquiescence. "I will remain downstairs."

Seraphim glared at him dubiously, but grabbed Draco's wrist and led him back upstairs. He checked to make sure Severus wasn't following them and pulled the blond into the bedroom. Draco smiled at him and Seraphim managed a small smile in return.

"You're filthy. Why don't you take a bath?" Draco suggested hopefully. He didn't know how much longer he could stand the smell without vomiting.

"No."

"Seph, no offense, but you stink. It's disgusting. Take a bath and I'll get you some clean, warm clothes."

Seraphim glared at him, but the bruise reminded him that he had failed and the blond deserved consideration. Sighing, he nodded but added, "You will stay with me."

Draco nodded and went to the closet. Seraphim followed him. When he asked what the alter wanted to wear, Seraphim merely stared at him blankly. Draco picked a few things and headed for the bathroom. Seraphim pulled him away from the door before he could open it and checked the hallway very carefully before allowing the blond to proceed. He checked the bathroom, too.

Eventually, Draco had the bath running and coaxed Seraphim into taking off his clothes. He frowned when he saw the discoloration of his nails, feet, and hands. He must have been frozen for hours last night. He moved to turn down the heat, knowing it would seem twice as hot to the chilled teen. He only hoped that he had defrosted enough by now that it wouldn't hurt too badly.

Seraphim stared at the water unhappily. "I don't want to," he whispered, lifting pleading green eyes to the blond.

"It will warm you up," Draco soothed.

Seraphim sighed and stepped into the tub, the knife still in his hand just in case it was needed. Draco jumped as the alter screamed and basically fell the rest of the way into the tub, the frostbite on his toes and hands burning like acid. Draco hurried to that alter's side and grabbed his arm.
"It's tricking me," Seraphim whimpered, pulling away from Draco's grasp. Large tears spilled from his eyes and he huddled in on himself. "It hurts, it hurts."

"Oh, Seph." Draco closed his eyes and leaned against the tub. "It will feel better soon and then you will be really warm."

A good thirty minutes passed before Seraphim's sobs tapered off. Draco turned the warm water back on, making it as hot as the teen could stand it. Seraphim stared at him with amazed, wide eyes, a look of startled pleasure filling his filthy face. Draco talked him through the process of washing his body and his hair. By the end, he was even smiling and his stomach rumbled from the fruity, yummy smell. Draco laughed and splashed him lightly. Seraphim giggled and splashed him back.

"Come on. Let's get you something to eat." Draco smiled and lifted up a large towel.

Seraphim stood and took the cloth. After drying, he pulled on the clothes Draco had chosen - a pair of jeans, a white T-shirt, and a black sweater. Together, they made their way to the kitchen; Seraphim in the lead, his smile replaced by a dangerous expression. The knife - now clean - glistened in the light. As Draco suspected, the kitchen was empty; Severus must have warned Omi to stay out of sight. They raided the cupboards and made simple sandwiches. Seraphim ate four very quickly as Draco stared with wide eyes.

"Do you want another one?"

"No," Seraphim answered thickly. His belly was full, he was warm, and now he felt very sleepy. He forced his eyes open and took Draco by the wrist.

They made their way back to the bedroom. Seraphim shut the door and pulled the dresser in front of it. No one would get in while he slept. Draco stared at the dresser in consternation. How was he going to sneak out to talk to Severus now? But that was forgotten as Seraphim took his hand and led him to the bed. He felt his heart pick up speed and stared as Seraphim sat and tugged for him to do the same.

Draco sat on the edge of the bed carefully. Seraphim crawled under the covers and put his head on the pillows. A sigh of contentment rose from his mouth. With his eyes clothes, Draco could almost believe that this was Shadow. He itched to curl up next to him, to pull the curly-haired teen into his arms.

"Rest. I won't let anyone hurt you," Seraphim murmured.

Draco lay down. His hand brushed Seraphim's arm accidentally and the alter pulled it away. Draco sighed and closed his eyes. He had no idea how they were going to get Shadow back, but he hoped it was soon. This was likely going to kill him.

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Minerva walked tiredly from the abandoned department store that the Wizengamot had decided to meet in. It was a long step down from their usual accommodations, and it only emphasized the urgency of the threat Voldemort posed. Still, the Wizengamot never acted rashly. She had been sequestered with them for almost twenty-four hours. The first three she had been forced to defend herself from Fudge's accusations of being in league with the Dark Lord and building a force to supplant the Ministry's authority.

The Wizengamot had listened to their arguments without comment until finally ruling in favor of Minerva, stating that without the Order's help at Azkaban they would have suffered far greater
losses. However, she had been ordered to disband the Order and transfer the members over to the MLE where they would be inducted as Aurors. The reason for this was stated that they needed to stand united.

Minerva, having been intimately familiar with the Ministry's ineffectiveness in times of crisis, particularly under the rule of someone so incompetent, knew this to be a mistake, so simply responded that she was no longer a member of the Order since the summer when she had been ordered to disband the group and held no control over them. Fudge had exclaimed that this was ridiculous, but after her story had remained the same even under Veritaserum, they'd had no choice but to let the matter go.

She hadn't been surprised to see relief in some of the ancient wizards and witches faces at her consistent answer. It seemed that many of them realized that though such a group was dangerous to their authority, it was also vital as a defense against the on-coming threat. That issue finally put to rest, Minerva had been surprised to be elected to join the Wizengamot. Fudge had been almost incoherent with rage. The induction and the vows took another two hours.

Her first act as a member of the Wizengamot had been to lead the discussion of what was to be done to protect the Wizarding World, and to a lesser extent, the Muggles. After nearly eighteen hours, in which there had been few breaks and many Pepper-Up Potions, they had finally worked out security measures for flooing and Apparating, as well as stricter policies regarding dangerous magical items and potions ingredients. Of course, many people were going to be displeased with the activation of martial law, but they'll be more upset about the magical drain required of them.

The increased defenses and the ancient communication spell that would register people in great distress - thus allowing the Aurors to respond to emergencies more quickly - took magical energy. This energy was harvested from the wands registered with the Ministry. Every time one was used, a small amount would be channeled not into the spell but to the Ministry. The difference in people's spell power would be noticeable enough to be an annoyance, but not enough for people to actively protest. And due to raised security, obtaining an unregistered wand would be very difficult and expensive now.

"How did it go?" Charlie asked as she stepped into the kitchen, aiming to get some tea.

"Better than I expected, actually," she said and smiled at him. "I'm now a member of the Wizengamot, Severus's potion granting temporary immunity to Veritaserum still worked, and the Order is unofficially being accepted. Fudge is still being difficult, but fortunately he is losing power. Any news about Severus or Shadow?" Minerva asked after taking a sip of her deliciously hot tea.

"None." Charlie shook his head tiredly. The only boy who could save them from darkness was still utterly and frustratingly missing, and one of their most valuable agents was AWOL with him.

"We'll keep looking," Minerva said and stood to see to the search parties herself.

"I've already taken care of it." Charlie stood and put a gentle hand on her arm. "You need to rest. You were injured recently, if you recall. We need you steady."

Minerva balked at this. Since when did one of her students dare tell her what to do? But then she realized that Charlie was her peer now. He was probably right, considering she had almost just hexed him. Sighing, she carried her tea up to her bedroom without argument.

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Draco woke as Seraphim flung himself from the bed in the grip of a vicious flashback. He watched
with horror as the teen bit his own arm to muffle his screams, his body jerking as if it being struck. His back arched again and again, and suddenly it hit Draco with intimate clarity that Seraphim was reliving a time when he had been whipped.

"Seph! Wake up! It's just a dream. You're okay. Seph!" He crouched before the alter and tried to pry his arm from his mouth. Blood was already dripping on the floor.

Seraphim collapsed, whining low in his throat. Draco relaxed, thinking he had succeeded, but then Seraphim spoke, "Please, Uncle… forgive me… I'm sorry… Won't do it again! …"

"Seph, please! Wake up!"

Green eyes stared blindly through him. Suddenly, the alter flung himself onto his back. His mouth stretched wide in a silent scream and his face contorted in torment. Draco jumped to his feet and ran for the door. He needed help! But at the sound of the dresser being shoved from the door, Seraphim jerked. He sat up with a gasp, sweat dripping from his chin, but his throat was too constricted to call out for the blond to stop. Scrambling for his wits, Seraphim got to his hands and knees; he grabbed his knife off the floor and stumbled to the door.

"Draco, no, it's not safe," he cried out weakly. He got to the hallway and raced for the stairs, only to see that Severus and Draco were already halfway up it. Seraphim held the knife out before them and they froze.

"Seph…" Draco panted, out of breath. "You're awake."

"Come here," he ordered as he glared fiercely at Severus. Draco glanced at Severus and the man nodded. Moving quickly, he stepped up to Seraphim's side. The alter grabbed his arm in a painfully hard grip and gestured with the knife that Severus should back off. The Potion Master did so, his eyes never leaving the alter's. Seraphim led Draco back to the room and shoved the dresser in front of it once more.

Seraphim stepped up to Draco and glared hard into his eyes. "Don't leave."

"I'm sorry, but you needed help." Draco kept a wary eye on the knife in his friend's hand.

"I don't need help!" Seraphim bellowed. Draco flinched back at the ferocity. "I need you to stay safe!" He punched the wall right by Draco's head, making his chin-length blond hair flare out briefly. "I need you to STAY HERE!"

"Okay," Draco whispered, honestly afraid that Seraphim would hurt him. "Okay, Seph. I won't leave again."

"Good."

Seraphim paced and agitatedly ran his hands through his hair. Draco watched him silently. Every attempt at conversation Draco made was brushed off or met with a silent stare. Seraphim continued to pace, stopping to check the door several times. Once he even took a few practice swings with his knife. He calmed a bit when time passed and still no threat presented itself.

"You can sit on the bed," Draco offered as the alter settled himself in the corner, his knees drawn up to his chest.

Seraphim regarded the bed almost suspiciously. "No." It had been one thing to sleep on it, but quite another to assume he could lounge on it during the day. He glanced at the door worriedly, almost
expecting someone to come in and punish him for such a thought. He bared his teeth threateningly. No one would punish him again.

Draco sighed and went to the desk. He began crafting Severus a letter reporting on Seraphim's disturbed behavior, but he had no way to actually send the thing. Seraphim would attack the elf if he summoned Omi and there were no owls. If he went too close to the door, Seraphim would get angry and threatening, but he couldn't sit here doing nothing! He'd go insane. He glanced again at the alter as an idea came to him.

"Do you want to play a game?"

Seraphim tilted his head, confused.

Draco grabbed a piece of paper and the Never-Out Quill. He sat in front of Seraphim and bit the end of the quill. "Okay. So this game is called Wands versus Potions. You see, the wands player makes X's like two crossed wands and the potions player makes O's. The person who gets three marks in a row wins," he explained, drawing a small grid on the paper and demonstrating. "We take turns. I'll go first."

"Why?" Seraphim asked quietly as he watched the blond make a new grid and mark an X in the top right corner.

"It's fun," Draco patiently explained. He stared into the deep green eyes and wondered what was going on behind them.

Seraphim stared at the quill offered to him and then looked back down at the paper with bafflement.

"Like the toy that made colors," Draco reminded coaxingly. When the alter merely stared at him, he sighed in exasperation. "It's better than doing nothing."

Seraphim's eyes widened and he took the quill. "It's better than remembering…” he said softly.

Draco nodded sadly. "Yes. Sometimes it's better than remembering."

Seraphim leaned down and tried to make a circle. It was too big and was more like a scribble, but he looked up with a happy smile. Draco grinned back. He reached for the quill since it was his turn now and accidentally brushed the alter's fingers. Seraphim flinched at the contact and dropped the quill.

"I'm sorry," Draco said quickly, grabbing up the quill.

Seraphim shook his head, but he kept both arms close toward his body. Draco took his turn and pushed the quill in his direction. Seraphim regarded him through cold eyes, but eventually he moved to take his turn. Draco sighed in relief and they continued to play. It took three turns before Seraphim truly grasped the rules, and even then he didn't seem to care who won or lost. He was just enthralled with the idea of interacting with Draco in a harmless way.

Draco was just taking his turn again when, suddenly, Seraphim fell sideways, unconscious. "Seph!" He gently shook the alter's shoulder. "Seph?"

Severely worried, Draco checked for his pulse. His eyes widened as he felt his friend's heart rate pick up and watched tension lines crease the teen's forehead. He was tempted to fetch Severus, but when he went to stand, the teen groaned. Draco held his breath as his friend slowly opened his eyes; a single blue eye and pale green one looked up at him. Grinning stupidly, he helped Shadow sit up.

"We're home?" Shadow's eyes went wide and he leapt to his feet. He grabbed Draco by the
shoulders and shook him. "Where is he? Where's my father?"

A grating noise sounded as the dresser was pushed away. Both teens stared as the door opened and Severus limped into the room.

"Severus!" Shadow cried and ran forward.

Severus smiled as he embraced his son. The spell he had been working on all morning finally succeeded, allowing him to slip unnoticed through Seraphim's mind and awaken his son. It had taken a bit of encouragement, but he had finally gotten Shadow to fight to reestablish himself.

"I thought… I thought you were dead," Shadow whispered into his father's chest. He felt shaken to his core. Severus had come to represent home, safety, security, and care. The thought of losing the man was terrifying.

"I am well," Severus murmured, gently squeezing the back of Shadow's neck.

"What happened? How? I saw you fall!" Shadow exclaimed, his voice thick with emotion as he pulled back to stare up at his father.

"Seraphim miraculously pulled me to safety," he answered reluctantly.

Shadow closed his eyes, gratitude and frustration swamping him. He was thankful to have his father safe, but why did he need Seraphim's assistance? Why couldn't he do such things on his own? He was surprised by the sudden surge of animosity he felt for his alter. Shaking himself free of his darkening thoughts, he opened his two-colored eyes and frowned. "What were you doing there anyway?"

"I would prefer to have such conversations in a more comfortable place. How about the parlor?" Severus asked, already turning to go downstairs.

Shadow looked back at Draco to ask more questions. As soon as he looked into Draco’s grey eyes he blushed as he remembered their kiss. He turned and hurried after his father without a word.

Draco sighed, straightened his clothes, before he followed after the two Snapes.

Severus sat in his usual chair, his hands folded on his knee. His leg was throbbing as a warning that he would need a pain-relieving potion soon, but he kept this off his face, not wanting to distract his son. Shadow sat across from him on the couch with Draco sitting on the opposite end. Calmly, Severus began to explain the events that had happened - with some careful editing that he didn't feel at all guilty about. He didn’t tell Shadow about Draco's bruise or that he'd found him covered in blood and wielding a knife in that alleyway.

Shadow was shocked that almost three days had passed since the debacle in the Department of Mysteries. Draco almost winced at the dark, angry expression on his best friend's face when he was told Seraphim had possibly killed Moody. It got worse when he was told that the alter had been reluctant to allow Shadow to resurface.

"Are you telling me that Seraphim could come out at any time and keep me under? That I have to be worried about being possessed by him at any moment? That I'm responsible for more deaths?"

Severus hadn't had time yet to speak to his son about the murders at St. Mungo's. He was worried. Before that point, Demon had only killed those who were guilty of heinous crimes, like the Death Eaters and Voldemort, or heinous abuse, like the Dursleys. These were the first innocents to fall in the face of Shadow's insanity. It didn't look like Shadow was coping well if the almost feverish glow
to his eyes was any indication.

Shadow hugged his arms around his chest defensively and glared murderously at the wall. "Tell me what happened at the cave?" He wasn’t ready to talk about Seraphim yet. Or any of it really. He felt like he was falling. His breathing was quick and light, a panic attack imminent.

Severus remembered that pushing had resulted in Seraphim's flight and decided to let Shadow have some time before discussing the situation further. He pulled his hands toward his stomach, the anger he kept tightly in check rising slightly to the surface. "First, I want to discuss your presences at the Ministry."

Shadow’s eyes narrowed. "I went to protect the prophecy."

Severus smiled and it wasn't at all pleasant. "And did you protect the prophecy?"

Shadow kept his face blank while Draco winced and pressed his back against the couch. He definitely didn't want to have this conversation again.

"I am under the impression that Draco was the one to destroy the prophecy. The only reason you are not all dead or maimed is because Longbottom outthought both of you and allowed for a contingency plan should the inevitable occur and you encountered trouble."

Shadow flushed with shame, but then he frowned. "What do you mean, the only reason not all of us died or were maimed?" He blanched. "Are the others okay?"

Severus lifted an eyebrow. "Black was able to write a short missive on Christmas while everyone was distracted. Ron's condition is still critical, but though Hermione and Miss Tonks were injured severely, they are expected to make a full recovery barring complications. Miss Weasley has yet to be returned to her rightful age."

Shadow closed his eyes and clenched his fists, but he couldn't reign in his temper. He exploded from his seat and stared down at his father, bellowing on the top of his lungs. "What would you have had me do? Huh, Severus? Fudge is an idiot; he would have blocked the Ministry from acting. And even if they had treated my warning seriously, the Death Eaters would have overpowered them easily! And I couldn't tell the Order, not after what happened at St Mungo’s. Not to mention the fact that I assume both the Ministry and the Order were busy dealing with whatever spectacular diversion Voldemort had planned!

“I tried to get in touch with you, and that failed. So I did the best I could! Don't fucking sit there glaring at me like I'm a stupid child who should have known better. I didn't ask to be chosen by the Dark Lord! I didn't ask to carry a piece of his rotting, evil soul! I didn't start this war, Severus! And I sure as hell am not responsible for not being able to work with the Aurors or the Order! The blame for that lies solely with them." Shadow stood there, panting and trembling with fury, finishing his rant with a passionate cry of, "The only thing I regret is the fact that I needed a bloody alter to save my ass once again!"

Severus stared, face pale, while Draco's mouth literally hung open.

Shadow spun around, turning his back to them, and tried to regain his composure. He regulated his breathing and concentrated on every deep breath in and slow breath out. When he felt steady, he turned around. "What happened at the cave?" he asked again. The previous conversation was over in his opinion.

Severus stared at his son, feeling at a loss. Shadow sat too close to the edge and this time Severus
wasn’t sure how to pull him back. To stall, he decided to answer the question. "The cave was thoroughly protected. Once we began to dismantle the defenses, there was no chance to stop. That is why I did not return at your summons. I deeply regret the delay."

"I understand," Shadow said softly. He knew his father would have come had he been able.

"What sort of defenses?" Draco questioned, helpfully pushing the conversation forward.

"Dark wards, Inferi, and a very potent poison are just a few of the things we encountered." Severus sat forward and wiped tiredly at his mouth, remembering. "We would not have survived had we not attempted it together. Even still, there were times I was sure one of us was not going to make it."

Shadow sat heavily, returning to his place on the couch. He knew how deep the animosity between his godfather and Severus was. For his father to even hint that Sirius had been useful, or even necessary, showed just how badly things had gone.

"We finally reached the basin, but… the locket was not there."

"What?" Draco exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

Shadow felt sick. His father and Sirius had almost died for nothing. Severus raised his hand, asking for a moment. "However, there was a strange message." He reached into his robe pocket and retrieved the note. Shadow took it, read it quickly, and then handed it to Draco who was once more sitting, this time much closer to his friend.

"Who's RAB?" Draco asked curiously.

"Black believes it to be his deceased younger brother, Regulus."

"He was a Death Eater?" Shadow questioned with a frown.

"Yes."

"And you think he turned against the Dark Lord as you did?" Draco added doubtfully.

"Black believes this to be the case and I agree."

"So where's the locket?" Shadow asked, frustrated.

"Black is looking for it at Grimmauld Place. Should it not be there, we will have to search pawn shops."

"That will take forever!" Draco cried, dismayed.

Severus inclined his head. "It will take time, yes."

Shadow leaned back, defeat bowing his shoulders forward. "Will this ever end?"

"It will," Severus snapped sternly, capturing his son's dull gaze. "We will beat this."

Shadow shook his head. "I'm going to the kitchen."

Draco shot Severus a worried glance and followed. He didn't say anything as he stood by Shadow's shoulder and watched Omi make them some roast beef sandwiches. Things were not going as well as they had hoped when they'd gone back to school in September, just three and a half months ago.
He was jostled out of his bleak thoughts when Shadow began to laugh. Startled, he looked over to see his friend chortling, hunched over the kitchen table, his sandwich only half eaten. One green eye, one blue met his as Shadow’s laughter tapered off to be replaced with an ironic smile.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Draco frowned and wiped primly at the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

Shadow shook his head, sending his curls bouncing. "No. It's just… All this shit is happening and all I can think about right now is…” He blushed and shook his head again.

Draco felt an answering blush rise in his cheeks and all thoughts of the war and their impossible position disappeared completely. He became hyperaware of how close they were sitting, that their hands rested mere inches apart. His heart began to beat quicker in his chest and his eyes fell to Shadow’s soft lips. Raising them, he saw the brunet was staring back at him with a mixture of hesitancy and acknowledgement.

"I don't know what to say," Shadow whispered softly, holding the increasingly bright silver gaze. "Everything is just so fucked up."

"Not this," Draco answered immediately, fiercely. "What's between us is…”

Shadow interrupted, blushing harder. "I know. Okay? I know what's between us. Don't…” His cheeks burned even hotter with embarrassment. "You don't have to say it."

They had both come through difficult trials and decided to stand on their own against an unfair world. Draco understood him in a way no one else could, except maybe Severus. But unlike Severus, Draco had actually traveled the hard road of self-discovery with him. It wasn't one-sided. Shadow had seen Draco change and grow, had helped him and had been helped by him. And he was beautiful. Shadow wanted to express how much he cared about Draco, how much he loved him. He wanted to touch him, kiss him; he wanted to physically prove that what was intangible between them was solid and real.

Draco saw some of this in Shadow's striking eyes. He felt like he was on fire and they weren't even touching. Just knowing that Shadow was looking at him like that and not running away made his blood boil. Holding that intense gaze, Draco smoothly reached over and gently curled his fingers around Shadow's hand, caressing the brunet's palm once.

Shadow sucked in a breath. His head tilted forward, curls spilling over his forehead and hiding his eyes. Draco smiled, heart jumping in his chest, and slid his hand to Shadow's wrist, cradling it. Shadow's fingers flexed as Draco's thumb stroked his palm in a slow lazy circle. He could feel Shadow's pulse, strong and fast. It mirrored his own.

"Do you…” Shadow cleared his throat and pulled his hand away. "Do you want to duel?"

Draco understood. Shadow needed more time, needed space. He nodded even though he was hard and aching already. “Sure. Let's duel.”

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Sirius stomped his feet to get the snow off his shoes. He unbuttoned his jacket and stepped into the parlor. The walk up from the village had been cold, but he would have rather continued walking than confront Snape. Severus turned from the fireplace mantle, his eyes were fathomless. Sirius grimaced and ran a hand through his damp hair.

"If the locket was there, it isn't now," he reported and reached for the papers in his coat. "And it gets
worse. I didn't want to tell you in a letter but here."

Severus took the papers and stared down at the headlines. "A mass breakout..." he read. He lifted his eyes to Sirius's. "We lost control of the Dementors."

"Some believed it was only a matter of time." Sirius shrugged uncomfortably. "They are Dark creatures."

Severus said nothing.

"How's Shadow?"

Looking down at the papers, Severus had a sudden urge to snarl. Instead, he lifted his eyes and asked in the coldest voice he could, "How do you think he is?"

Sirius grinned, irrepressible, but before he could say anything else, a high-pitched shriek sounded from upstairs. Both Sirius and Severus sprinted for the stairs. They could hear Draco's voice fast with worry, trying to calm the other teen down. Severus burst into the dueling room first, terrified to find Seraphim, but his son's two-colored eyes looked up at him at his entrance.

"It's gone!" Shadow yelled hysterically. He was sitting on his butt, Draco was crouched beside him, and Severus had never seen a look of such abject horror on his face before.

"I'm sure it's not gone permanently," Draco was saying. He looked up at the two men pleadingly. "You used a massive amount to save Severus, not to mention bringing the Ministry down. I'm sure you just need to rest and..."

"It's already been three days and I can't do so much as a Lumos!" Shadow screamed at him.

Severus strode forward and knelt, firmly grabbing Shadow by his shoulders. "We will go to Hogwarts tomorrow. I'm certain Rowena and Salazar will be able to evaluate your magic, but the prophecy alone tells me that you will regain your magic for you alone can destroy the Dark Lord."

"Or he can destroy me!" Shadow snapped, practically panting with fear. He slapped his father's hands away roughly and staggered to his feet. Wincing and putting a hand to the sharp sting in his chest, he glared at everyone. "That's hardly reassuring. Just leave me alone!"

Draco stood and made a move to follow his distraught friend as Shadow ran from the room, but Severus stopped him with a small shake of his head.

"Give him space," he said softly just as the door to Shadow's room slammed shut with a resounding thud.

"What about the papers? Maybe we shouldn't tell him for awhile," Sirius suggested, shifting nervously. He had been shocked to see his godson practically come unglued right before his eyes. "He's obviously under a lot of stress."

"And he will remain under stress for a long time to come," Severus spat in frustration. He quickly took a breath, trying to control his temper. "We will see how he is at dinner." Severus countered. He turned his eyes to the blond. Draco regarded him coolly. "Perhaps you would like to work on some potions with me until then?"

Draco knew the man was really just asking to speak to him alone, so he nodded. Besides, it wasn't like he had anything else to do. Left to his own devices, he'd be banging on Shadow's door within minutes.
Severus nodded slightly and turned to Black. "I recommend you leave him alone in the meantime."

"Whatever you say." Sirius shrugged. He had a bit of sleep to catch up on anyway.

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Severus stared at his ingredients, very aware of Draco waiting near the door. Finally, he turned and faced his Slytherin. "My behavior earlier was inexcusable. My only explanation is that my self-control was weakened by my experience through the veil. I've found myself... over-emotional since I've been returned from death." He said this last with a disgusted sneer. Such a thing was anathema to him. "I hope in time I will regain my former composure."

"I understand, sir. I apologize for not seeing to the mark. That was very foolish of me," Draco answered, offering peace between them.

Severus nodded sharply and regarded the teen before him. "There is another topic I would like to speak to you about."

"Oh?" Draco asked, pretending indifference, but his heart picked up speed and a cold sweat broke out along his brow. There was only one other thing he could think of that Severus would want to talk to him about privately.

"I have been aware of your developing feelings for my son and I can only assume that you and he have come to realize you have those feelings in common. I do not need to tell you how difficult such a relationship will be," he continued, holding the blond's startled grey eyes. "If you have any questions or need advice, my door will always be open."

"Thank you," Draco said softly.

"I did not say anything sooner because you comport yourself very well with him."

Draco flushed, completely taken off guard by the praise.

Severus shifted, breaking the uncomfortable moment, and turned to the cauldron. "Dice the lizard eyes, if you would."

The blond moved to obey, a small smile helplessly captured on his lips. He had never imagined having Severus's support. Not that that would have stopped him, but with it he felt much more confident of his success. His smile widened into a grin.

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Shadow sat stiffly through dinner, answering direct questions monosyllabically. Severus showed him the newspapers and he merely nodded at them in acknowledgement. He said nothing as Severus informed them they would get up at four in the morning so that they would arrive at Hogwarts before the sun rose. He ignored Draco's worried glances and arched eyebrows and continued to say nothing.

He lay in bed staring up at the ceiling in the dark. He couldn't sleep and the numb shock was wearing off. Slowly, his eyes widened and his heart rate picked up. Panic slid into his veins. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, trying not to move. This stinging in his chest was back, but now it was becoming a burn. Abruptly Shadow realized it was coming from the relocated lightning-bolt scar, and it could only mean one thing. Seraphim was trying to surface.

Shadow scrambled from the bed and practically ran downstairs. He threw the front door open. The
cold air hit him in the face like a slap; the burning worsened. Closing his eyes tightly, he ran. He'd give anything to turn into a cat and adopt the simpler mindset and emotions it would have provided him with, but he had no magic. He couldn't even Apparate. The wand that sat in his wrist-sheath was useless to him. Panting, he ran as hard as he could. His lungs screamed. His stiff muscles protested, but he couldn't stop. He just couldn't.

He was surprised when he eventually ran onto main street, deep in the village. Had he really gone so far? He looked around. It was late, dark, and cold. He was alone. The snow muffled all sound, making his breathing roar in his ears. A headache beat at him and he clutched at his hair. Almost wildly, he waved his wand and a loud BANG answered him.

The Knight Bus pulled up and he almost laughed. Maybe his wand wasn't completely worthless after all. He jumped on and shouted his destination before diving toward the back. The bus was almost empty, but the few passengers stared at him as if he were a wild thing. He sneered at them and pushed himself into a dark corner.

The ride was too short and also too long. White lights flashed before his eyes as he stumbled from the horrid contraption, but he didn't know what he was going to do now that he was here. Stumbling, he crunched through the snow and reached a large front door. He just stood on the step and stared helplessly at the wooden surface when it was suddenly yanked open away from him.

"Well, come in. Don't just stand there."

Shadow stared up at Mrs. Longbottom for a long second before stepping past her. He didn't say a word as he walked quickly toward the stairs and went up. He could feel her eyes on him, but he did his best to ignore her. Quietly, he pushed open Neville's door. The teenager was sitting at his desk, staring sleepily out at the world despite it being close to two o'clock in the morning. When he turned and saw Shadow, his eyes went wide.

"What's wrong?" Neville frowned, standing and facing his brother.

Shadow saw red and furiously slammed the door. "Everything! What isn't wrong, huh, Nev? Tell me that!"

Neville scrubbed at his face. The cloud of depression that had settled on him since being home made it difficult to think. The hibernating earth humming at him didn't help, either. "What are you talking about?" he asked, confused.

"I'm a fucking murderer! I kill people! It was one thing to know I killed the Dursleys, one thing to know I killed Quirrell, Voldemort, and Lockhart, they all fucking deserved it. But still! The way it was done was DISGUSTING, not to mention the innocents Demon killed starting with boiling merfolk to death in the lake and then killing those people at St Mungo's! It could have been your parents, Nev!"

Neville could only stare dumbly as Shadow paced and ranted at him. He tried to cut in twice, but Shadow shouted right over him. Wisely, he sat back down and just listened.

"But then I find out that, Hey! That kind of heartless brutality wasn't something intrinsic to me. It came naturally to Voldemort's foul, stinking soul. So, yes. I have a monster's soul leeching onto mine, but the plus side was that what Demon did wasn't really my fault. It was his!"

Neville could only stare dumbly as Shadow paced and ranted at him. He tried to cut in twice, but Shadow shouted right over him. Wisely, he sat back down and just listened.

"But then I merged with that soul and made it my own, supposedly cleaning it of all Voldemort's instincts, and then what happens? Can you guess?" Shadow laughed wildly. "I kill more people. I murdered Moody! I should turn myself in to the Ministry and let them lock me away! But then who's
to stop the fucking Dark Lord from capturing and torturing me then? I might as well wrap myself up in a bow and hand myself over to him now!"

"Shadow…” Neville tried again, really worried and finally fully awake.

"There is always the death penalty. If I'm dead, Voldemort can't get a hold of me and the danger I pose to everyone will be eliminated. But then I'd be dooming everyone to a world of darkness and despair because - That's right! - I'm supposedly mankind's last hope against evil!” Shadow laughed, bending over as tears streaked down his face. "But wait!… the Boy Hero… has no magic!"

Neville could only stare as his brother wheezed, trying desperately to regain his breath.

"But hell… Who am I fooling? … Even with magic… what kind of chance do I really have? We can't find the Horcruxes… Voldemort just stole back his most insane and evil Death Eaters… and he has Dementors on his side now. The death penalty doesn't sound so bad and god knows I deserve it." Shadow looked up and smiled bitterly. "Maybe I could challenge Voldemort to an insanity contest… It'd be pretty close, but I think I'd win in the end. How many voices do you think he has in his head?"

"All right. That's enough," Neville said firmly and grabbed Shadow by the shoulders, forcing him to stay still and look at him. "You are not a murderer. Do you hear me? A murderer wouldn't be falling apart at the thought of killing people! A murderer wouldn't care who was innocent and who was guilty. Voldemort is a murderer. The Death Eaters are murderers. You are not them."

"People are dead, Nev. I killed them! I can't fucking control myself," Shadow yelled, crying openly now. "I'm a monster!"

"They're dead," Neville agreed, his dark eyes steady, refusing to let Shadow go. "But you're not a monster."

Shadow snorted in denial and slapped his brother's hands away.

"Listen to me!" Neville said firmly, grabbing hold of him again and shaking him slightly. "A child was tortured and broken beyond human endurance. Demon may not exist any longer, but Seraphim has his memories. Worse, he is Boy. Those two sets of very horrific experiences shape who he is. He may seem more coherent than either Boy or Demon, but he is not well, Shadow. He is sick and hurt. He doesn't think or feel the way any normal person would. His reality is severely warped. You can't hold him accountable to a morality he doesn't know exists. Dursley almost beat him to death dozens of times for things he didn't understand. He didn't remember what you had done or what happened before hand. All he knew was that a man existed to seemingly beat him and torture him. Right? That's what he thinks people do. This is reinforced by what happened with the Death Eaters. You can't expect him to understand that it's not okay to hurt or kill others."

Shadow pulled away and punched the wall. "You can't just excuse Seraphim walking around and killing people just because he's suffered!"

"You've suffered," Neville corrected gently, eyes wide at the violent display. "You've suffered more than anyone alive can ever comprehend. And no. We can't just let Seraphim lash out, but what he’s done is not your fault. You do not deserve to be in jail or to have your magic taken away. You deserve help! Me, Snape, Draco, Sirius, and Remus - we've all pledged to guard you and help keep Seraphim from causing damage as well as protect him from getting hurt. If Seraphim has killed again, it's our fault."

"That's ridiculous! I'm fucking CRAZY! I need to be locked up!" Shadow shouted. He could hardly
Neville shook his head hard. "Boy was allowed to be abused and tortured by the family the Order left him with. Then he was literally tortured by the Dark Lord that the Wizarding World has allowed to exist. Voldemort was created in part by those who were not willing to see he was ill and he became what he is today because no one checked his growth! If his soul compelled you to do evil things, that is more our sin to bear than it is yours when you were only an unwilling vessel."

"I called Demon! I used him! I fed him!" Shadow argued, desperately wanting to flee but unable to do so. He hadn't expected this at all. He wanted condemnation. He wanted to be stopped. What was Neville doing? What was he saying?

"In self-defense. Always as a last resort. You've never willingly embraced Demon. And even now you don't embrace Seraphim."

"You wouldn't forgive me if I'd killed your parents, Neville!" Shadow accused, voice wrecked with distress and guilt.

Neville looked him straight in the eye and said honestly, "Yes. I would." He gently took his brother's trembling shoulders into his hands. "Seraphim is ill by no fault of your own. We should have helped control him as we promised or helped you when you were being abused."

Shadow began to weep, his hands covering his face.

Neville pulled him into a tight hug. "We are going to do all we can to make up for it, Shadow. We are going to stop the Dark Lord. We are going to save people who would have died without us protecting them. It's going to be okay."

"He'll kill again! He'll never stop!" Shadow wailed into Neville’s shoulder.

"I won't let that happen," Neville said fiercely. "I haven't been doing my part to help you, but I will now. I'll find a way to keep this Seraphim from hurting others. You aren't alone, Shadow!"

"You think you have an answer for everything, don't you?" He said lowly, driven by something dark and self-destructive. He shoved Neville away. "You think all my sick, twisted tendencies are because of Seraphim? That we can just find a way to keep him unconscious and everything will turn out happily? Well, you're wrong. I'm sick, too, Neville. Not Seraphim, not Boy, not Demon. Me."

"What are you talking about?" Neville whispered, still not backing down.

Shadow slid his hands over Neville's shoulders and locked his fingers behind the taller teen's neck. He smiled - his two-colored eyes dark and disturbed. Neville paled, confused. He was afraid to pull away, afraid not to.

Shadow stepped closer and lifted his chin. "I like boys, Nev," he whispered. "I think about kissing them. I dream about cumming with their mouth on me. I'm no different from Lockhart." Neville gasped, jerking back, but Shadow held on. Putting his mouth right over his brother's, Shadow whispered, "I kissed Draco and I wanted more!"

Suddenly, Shadow was trembling. He let go of Neville and stepped away. His back hit the door and he slid down, staring up at his brother with lost, tormented eyes. The teen clutched at his shirt, his hand twisting the fabric above his heart. Voice breaking, he demanded, "Think you can save me now?"

"Merlin," Neville gasped, shaking. Bile rose up the back of his throat and he wanted to deny
everything his brother had just done and said. It couldn't be true. Lockhart flashed through his mind. The old disgust and utter humiliation, the fear and self-hate, came roaring back and he could almost feel the man's hands on him and inside him.

Shadow saw the revulsion in Neville’s eyes and couldn't take reality any more. His head jerked back, slamming into the door. When he opened his eyes, Neville found himself staring into two poisonous green irises. The alter jumped to his feet, his face contorted into a murderous glare. Neville stood stock-still, terrified and completely unable to move. Satisfied that Neville wasn't an immediate threat, Seraphim looked quickly around the unfamiliar room.

"Where's Draco?" he asked softly. Neville couldn't speak or move. Seraphim backhanded him viciously across the face, and the teen fell with a startled cry. "WHERE IS HE?" he bellowed.

Neville was almost grateful. The unexpected blow broke his paralysis and he stared up at the alter through narrowed eyes. "I don't know."

Seraphim scowled. "You brought me here!"

"Shadow showed up here on his own," Neville countered calmly.

"Shadow…” Seraphim whispered, confused. He turned and reached for the door.

"Why do you care so much about Draco?" Neville asked quickly. It was the first question that came to mind. All he knew was that he had to try and keep Seraphim with him. Otherwise, he might hurt someone again.

Seraphim turned back around and regarded the Gryffindor on the floor suspiciously. "I've seen you before."

"I'm Shadow's brother. If you hurt me, you'll hurt him." Neville had no idea what he was saying, but he remembered Seraphim's reaction when he had been told that the loss of Shadow's father had called him Out. He had saved Severus. Maybe telling Seraphim his importance to Shadow would protect him.

"Brother," Seraphim sneered. He crouched down and grabbed the teen, making Neville gasp and try to get away, but the alter's grip on his shirt was too firm. "I don't care about fathers or brothers," he growled. "I don't care about this Other me."

"But it will hurt you," Neville protested, red in the face from being half-strangled.

Seraphim let him go, scowling fiercely. "I can't kill you, but I will hurt you. Stay away from me."

"You care about Draco…” Neville said softly. His heart was pounding with adrenaline. He had to keep him talking. Shadow had to come back soon! And if he were honest, he wanted answers. Maybe Seraphim's attachment to the blond was affecting Shadow. Maybe that was why Shadow was feeling those awful things.

"Draco…” Seraphim's expression changed. It softened and Neville's eyes widened, surprised the alter could feel something so gentle. "Draco is…” he tapered off, confused.

"What? He's another person, too," Neville pressed.

"Draco is Boy," Seraphim snarled, his mood shifting back to anger. "I'll make sure nothing hurts Boy again."
Neville blinked. "You were Boy. Not Draco."

Seraphim backed away, shaking his head. "I'm not Boy! I'll never be Boy." Was this person threatening him? Did he want to make him Boy again and hurt him?

"But…" Neville started to stand.

To Seraphim, he was manageable while sitting down, but standing, the Gryffindor became a much stronger threat. "Shut up!" Seraphim lashed out, kicking the teen hard in the stomach.

Neville let out a surprised oomph and collapsed on his side. Tears sprang to his eyes and he tried desperately to drag in a breath past his spasming diaphragm. Seraphim hugged himself. Why was he talking to this person? He needed to get out of here. He needed to find Draco. And this time he wouldn't let himself be swayed. He'd take Draco and they'd hide. They would go far away from people and live where no one would hurt them ever again.

Spinning, he threw open the door and ran downstairs. Neville ordered him to stop, but Seraphim ignored the urgent, gasping croaks. He found himself in an unfamiliar living room and bolted for the front door. He was halfway there when he heard someone shout something from behind him. He turned, his arms coming up to protect his head from a blow, and was struck by a powerful stunner. Seraphim collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Augusta canceled the Disillusioning Charm she had cast on herself and walked over to the teen. He lay on his side, his hands up by his face, the fingers gently curled and relaxed. The boy's black curls were fanned out around his head. His appearance was almost innocent. Shadow had power and anyone who was the least bit sensitive could sense the chaotic winds of destiny that blew around him, but she had never expected the insanity she had just seen in his two glittering green eyes.

"Neville, I believe it is time you told me what is going on with this young man." She lifted her eyes and looked sternly at her grandson who was staggering down the stairs. "You have obviously bound yourself to his cause. Just what have you gotten us into?"

"I'm sorry Grandmother, but I'm not sure how much I should say," Neville answered as he moved toward his fallen brother.

Furiously, Augusta marched over to her grandson and stared him down. "I am the Head of this family, Neville Longbottom. You will tell me all you know!"

Neville stood at his full height, surprisingly matching his grandmother's stare. "I've pledged my honor as the Longbottom Heir to keep Shadow's secrets. Are you suggesting I break that pledge?"

Augusta said nothing for a long moment. She had seen this side of her grandson only a few times and it still surprised her. Worse, it seemed to come and go, returning her grandson back into the bumbling boy. "He's obviously unwell. I haven't seen that kind of look since crazy Aunt Ingrid!"

"That's it…" he whispered.

"… His eyes turned Killing Curse green! How dangerous is he? I won't have violence in my house, illness-driven or no! Are you listening to me?" Augusta demanded angrily, her eyes flashing and nostrils flaring.

"Levitate him to the couch. I'm going to contact someone." Neville saw that his grandmother was going to argue and cut her off. "I'm dealing with the problem like you want. Just do what I say, please."
Augusta sniffed disdainfully, her opinion of his ability to manage the situation obvious, but she did as her grandson requested. She also cast another Stupefy on the unconscious boy just in case. "And just whom are you writing so furiously?" she asked archly.

Neville ignored her and whistled for their owl Horis.

"I want answers, young man," she warned.

"Talk to Professor Snape," Neville answered calmly. "It's not my place to say. I gave my word."

Augusta glared coldly and crossed her arms. "And if I choose not to shelter this young man in the meantime?"

"Then I will take him and find somewhere safe to stay." Neville met her stare, unyielding.

"First thing in the morning, be assured I will write to Professor Snape. Keep him unconscious until then!" Augusta snapped and stomped from the room.

Neville sighed and relaxed. He walked over to the couch and stood there looking down at Shadow. Hugging himself, he tried to ignore what had been said, but without his grandmother distracting him, all he could think about was Shadow's mouth near his and the awful confession. Remus had been talking to him about accepting those with same-sex preferences, but he still felt deep down that it was wrong. He couldn't imagine Shadow - who knew how awful it was - would willingly consider a relationship with another boy. Surely Shadow was just confused! Or it was Seraphim's doing!

Frowning, Neville scratched at his forearms, unconsciously tracing the faint scars there. He remembered the nightmares during the summer when Shadow would wake shaking and sweating and run to the bathroom to be sick. It was insane. How could Shadow stand to do that willingly?

All this and more went through his head as he sat vigil over his friend. His wand was ready to cast Stupefy again, but it was unnecessary. Half an hour after he had sent off the letter, there was a knock at the door. Neville quickly opened it. Luna smiled at him and gave a little half-wave.

"I didn't expect you so soon!" Neville said, relief evident in his tone and face. "Come in."

"I wasn't busy," Luna said with a soft laugh. "And I had it in the attic, so I just thought I'd bring it over."

They moved into the living room. Luna looked down at Shadow and gently brushed his hair from his eyes while Neville examined the item she had brought.

He barely remembered Great Aunt Ingrid. Augusta's father's sister died when he was five. Born a Longbottom, she had married Edward Lovegood, who was an elder cousin of Luna's father. She'd had psychotic episodes since childhood that had been helped but not cured by potions. Because of this, another means of controlling her had to be found. In the end, they created a magical jacket for her.

It looked unassuming, but when the unique charms were activated, the sleeves would lengthen and wrap her arms around herself to prevent her from physically lashing out. The collar would close snugly around her throat and act as a magical suppressant as well. Plus, it was paired with a bracelet that could track the jacket in case his Great Aunt had gotten lost or ran away. Her son, Herbert Lovegood, had owned the bracelet at the time of her death over ten years ago and would have inherited the jacket as well. He was amazed that Luna actually had it.

"Here. Help me put it on him." Neville moved over to the couch and together they managed to get
the unconscious teen's arms into the jacket and settle it around his frame comfortably. It was a bit baggy, but it looked all right, Neville decided. It looked like a normal black jacket made from heavy cotton and softened with age and use. It wouldn't look too out of place over Muggle attire or the common black Wizarding robes.

"Why does he need it? Was he attacked by Nargols?" Luna asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Well, you see…" Neville shifted nervously.

Shadow groaned and began to wake from the Stupefy spell. Neville held his breath, praying it really was his brother and not Seraphim. Unfortunately, his eyes opened revealing poisonous green. Luna gasped and stepped back as hate rolled off the teen.

"Luna," Neville spoke tightly in a whisper. "How do you activate the jacket?"

Seraphim practically growled at them. His eyes glowed malevolently as his hands clenched threateningly. "Move," he rasped at Neville who had moved to block the way toward the door.

"Inhibitum," Luna called out, activating the jacket.

The sleeves promptly unraveled, crossed Seraphim's arms in a parody of a self-hug, and tied themselves into a knot at his lower back. The collar closed with a soft click and glowed faintly before settling. Seraphim's eyes went wide in horror. The scream that tore from his throat made them cringe. Augusta came running into the room, her wand at the ready, but she was too shocked to actually cast a spell when she came upon the scene.

Seraphim was oblivious to all of them. He was twirling and yanking at his arms, trying to break free of the jacket's embrace. Tripping over a coffee table, he fell hard with no way to break his own fall. Voice already going hoarse, Seraphim broke down into whimpering sobs. He curled up, bringing his legs to his chest as he lay on his side. The sound was so purely Boy that Neville took a few tentative steps forward, vague ideas of trying to calm the alter down floating through his head.

At his approach, Seraphim went from broken to furious in less than a second. He jerked backward, a hiss rising to his lips as he got to his feet and crouched. The small silver buckle on his collar glowed faintly and suddenly Neville felt himself being shoved backward. Luna instinctively reached out for the falling Gryffindor and they both went tumbling painfully to the floor, feeling like they had just been struck by a sack of flying bricks.

"Stupefy!" Augusta incanted firmly.

There was a bright flash as the spell was canceled a few inches before it struck. Seraphim screamed with rage and tensed, ready to charge the woman, but Neville beat him to it. He jumped to his feet and grabbed his grandmother's wand hand, shoving it toward the ground. Seraphim watched through wide, shocked eyes from his corner.

"Don't. He doesn't understand and he can't hurt us now," Neville said softly.

"The jacket only allows a small percent of magic through," Luna spoke up. Her long blonde hair had fallen from its tie and spilled messily down her back as she stood. "Aunt Ingrid could only affect things within five feet. I'd say Shadow can reach ten feet."

"If we stay out of that range, we'll be fine," Neville emphasized.

"He needs to see a doctor!" Augusta said shrilly. She yanked her hand away from her grandson and began to sharply straighten her clothes.
"He needs his father. I'm going to write Professor Snape now." Neville looked up at his grandmother pleadingly. "Let him stay that long, please."

"I want to be informed the moment Severus Snape arrives," Augusta demanded.

"Yes, ma'am."

Sniffing, the elder witch left the room with her head held high. Neville sighed and turned to look at his brother. Everything was beginning to catch up with him and his hands began to shake. He clasped them in front of him in an effort to hide it. Luna put her hand on his arm and smiled at him reassuringly. He couldn't manage to return the gesture.

Seraphim watched all this silently. His heart was still thudding hard in his chest and anxiety thrummed through him, but he had his magic back and that went a long way to comfort him. If he really needed to, he could stop anyone from coming near him or touching him. Still, he was very confused. The brother put him in the hated restraints, but then he defended him from the old woman who wanted to hurt him. He didn't understand anything that was going on. He needed to get away and find Draco. He wanted desperately to leave all the human madness behind.

As the three of them stood silently regarding each other, they slowly managed to calm down. Seraphim crouched quietly in his corner, his eyes watching their every move with simmering anger. Neville moved over to the desk and began writing another letter. Luna, meanwhile, moved toward the alter and sat on the floor about ten feet from him.

"I'm sorry the jacket upset you," she said softly, her blue eyes entreating. "It won't hurt you, though. People are afraid you'll hurt them, so they try to stop you, but now they'll see that you won't hurt anyone who doesn't hurt you first. They'll see the jacket and know you're different. People stay away from different, you'll see."

Seraphim listened but regarded the girl mistrustfully. Females were a bit of a mystery to him. He didn't like them and didn't trust them, but it was men who had hurt him most.

Neville stepped up behind her and crouched down, putting a hand on her shoulder. "He'll be okay. Professor Snape is on his way and he'll know what to do."

Luna nodded. "So much pain. So much anger." She shook her head hard, her hair falling around her face. "Things aren't so loud since I danced in the universe, but... Seraphim is very loud. I..." She began to tremble and, worried, Neville helped her to her feet. "I'm going to the kitchen until things are quiet again."

Neville stared after her. He had no idea what she was talking about. Shaking his head, he returned his attention to his brother. "Seraphim, I'm going to sit over there, far away from you, but you have to promise not to leave. Professor Snape is coming. He'll help you."

Seraphim scowled up at him and said nothing. It was strange. The alter was relatively harmless now, but as he glared up at him, his arms wrapped tightly around himself within the dark jacket, he looked even more frightening. Neville squeaked and hurried over to the other corner.

Seraphim's head lifted curiously at the Gryffindor's reaction. Ever since he had woken up here, the Gryffindor had never really shown fear, but he was obviously uncomfortable now. He smirked a little at that. Maybe the girl was right. Maybe the hated jacket would make people stay away from him.

Thoughts bloomed slowly in his mind as he realized Neville wasn't going to come near him again.
He was warm. While under threat from the strangers, he felt unbearably constrained, but now the tight jacket felt surprisingly comforting. Memories of the silent, dark cupboard flickered through his memories. It was the only comfort he had known during the time of endless pain. The jacket evoked those memories.

"Keep them away..." he muttered thoughtfully as the girl's words came back to him.

People always hurt him and he would kill everyone who hurt him, but... What if that scared them, just like it scared him when people tried to hurt him? Maybe the girl was right. People would see the jacket and be reassured that he was constrained and go the other way, anxious to avoid him.

Seraphim smiled a strangely gentle smile, true happiness sparkling in his eyes. Maybe the jacket wasn't so bad. It wasn't like he couldn't protect himself if he really had to. His magic was back and he still had his legs. He was certain that if he were really mad the jacket wouldn't be able to hold him. Not if his magic was back. Maybe... Maybe the jacket was a good thing. He snuggled down into its warm embrace and sighed. Yes, it felt safe.

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Severus had been searching for almost two hours now. Omi had alerted him to Shadow leaving the house, but they had found no sign of him. The blasted snow was falling heavily and had obliterated whatever tracks there may have been. He was about at his wits end. He had no idea what made Seraphim awaken or why he would flee. At first he thought Black had done something and had practically attacked the man until he saw for himself that the man's protestations of innocence were in fact true.

"I've been thinking, sir," Draco spoke up carefully. They were walking through the woods, hoping for any sign of his son.

Severus turned on the blond, the light of his Lumos charm making Draco seem like a bloodless ghost, he was so pale. "Do enlighten me," he grated.

Draco saw all how close his teacher was to snapping and tread carefully. "Why would Seraphim leave? He insisted that I go with him last time. I don't think he would have left without me."

Severus sneered. "Then what are you suggesting? Someone abducted him?"

"No," Draco shook his head lightly. "I think it wasn't Seraphim. I think it was Shadow who left. We should look where Shadow would go. Trying to think of where Seraphim would flee hasn't helped us."

"I would hope," Severus said slowly, "that my son would know better than to go running off in such precarious times." His eyes hardened and glittered like obsidian shards in his face. Draco winced. Without another word, Severus spun, his robes flaring gracefully. They marched quickly back toward the house. Draco didn't know what his teacher was thinking, but he was too afraid to ask.

"Snape!"

Draco lifted his head and saw Black running toward them across the snow. The house was just over the next hill. The parchment he was waving must hold urgent news indeed to send him running for them instead of sending a message charm requesting that they come back. Severus must have realized the same for he picked up his pace.

"Shadow's at Neville's!" Black panted, thrusting the letter toward the rigid Potions Master.
"It seems your supposition was accurate, Draco," Severus said softly, anger cutting through his voice like sharp daggers. "I shall return shortly. Return to the house."

Draco wasn't even tempted to protest and ask to go along, although he was desperate to make sure his friend was all right. He simply nodded and continued on toward the house. He didn't even turn around as he heard the sharp crack of Apparation. Sirius followed in his wake, still catching his breath. Draco was too lost in thought to really notice. Why would Shadow run away? Why hadn't he come to him first?

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Neville opened his door with a relieved smile, but one look at Severus's face and he felt his stomach drop queasily. The Potions Master breezed past the terrified Gryffindor without a word of greeting or question. He came to an abrupt halt, however, within the threshold to the living room. Seraphim met his gaze from across the room and grinned madly when he saw the intimidating man's shock and apprehension. The jacket had worked again, further cementing his acceptance of the garment.

"Longbottom, explain!" Severus barked, spinning around and skewering the Gryffindor on his stare.

Neville had his back pressed to the front door and he felt very trapped. "Well, sir, you see, uh…"

"Severus Snape. How good of you to come at such an ungodly hour in the morning. The sun has not yet risen if I'm not mistaken." Augusta Longbottom came down the stairs fully dressed with not a hair out of place.

Severus turned and gave a small bow. "Madam Longbottom." He pressed his hand over his heart briefly to show respect. "Allow me to express my deepest gratitude for the aid you have provided my son."

Augusta smiled and came to stand regally at the bottom of the stairs, her hand lingering on the banister. "As satisfying as your gratitude is, Professor Snape, it hardly compensates me for my loss of position within the Order or the danger he has posed to me and mine."

Severus stiffened and settled into a defensive position. His dark eyes turned cold and flat. Neville went pale as he felt the temperature in the room drop slightly. Augusta smiled coolly in response and stepped further into the room, showing contempt for his temper. She gestured graciously toward the couches as she moved to sit. Her robes settled around her elegantly. When Severus just regarded her through emotionless eyes, she gestured for a second time, this time more sharply.

Severus moved reluctantly into the room, but he would not sit. "I am troubled to hear of your difficulty with the Order. I was not aware my son's circumstances had so negatively affected you."

"My ward seems to have become enamored with your son and, as a result, interrogated ruthlessly by the Order in your son's place. I protested such treatment and resigned from my post, thus hindering my efforts of continuing my only son's lifework." During this speech, she kept her gaze slightly unfocused and unthreatening. Now she met his eyes. "I was not aware that you and yours were at odds with the aims of the Order."

"Our purpose is not at odds, Lady," Severus countered smoothly, face devoid of any emotion. "Merely, like you, we have a difference of opinion over methods."

"Perhaps." Augusta inclined her head with an indulgent smile. "However, I would like to judge for myself whether aiding your son is worth the cost." She gestured at the teen still couched in the corner and wrapped in the jacket. "His condition is rather startling, I must admit. From what does he..."
"Suffer?"

Severus said nothing. He took in the room and his son. He was aware Augusta had helped Shadow twice now, but that hardly entitled her to their secrets and access to their weaknesses. The treatment Longbottom had received in this house hardly endeared him to the woman.

"He suffers the aftermath of an unfamiliar curse. His healing is not yet complete," he answered easily.

Augusta regarded him stonily. She was far from stupid and knew there was more here than that, but she also knew pushing the man would lose her the advantage she had managed to obtain in the conversation and potentially mark her as his enemy. "How unfortunate," she said instead of demanding a more thorough explanation while she considered her options.

"By your leave, I will return him to his sickroom." Severus inclined his head and moved toward Seraphim. The alter stiffened immediately and bared his teeth threateningly.

"Do not go closer," she snapped. "His magic is effective within ten feet. The jacket is merely a device to temporarily render him harmless. We must wait for the fit to pass."

Severus ignored the woman - although he did stop outside the ten-foot zone. Seraphim smirked at that, his eyes glowing faintly, attesting to his returning magic. Severus had no time to feel relief. He wanted his son safe and away from anyone who could hurt him, including the Longbottom Matriarch. She could call the Aurors or the Order; either would mean disaster for them.

"The garment fascinates me. What are its properties?" Severus stalled. Contrary to his even tones, in truth he was raging inside. How dare they restrain his son in such a manner without permission? They had probably set Seraphim's rehabilitation back exponentially.

Neville stepped forward, scratching his arms nervously, and explained about his Great Aunt Ingrid and the jacket.

Severus kept his eyes on Seraphim while he listened. The alter looked like a cornered animal, but he was still coherent and rational. His intelligence grew every time he came out, it seemed. From Draco's description, the Demon-Boy combined alter could hardly speak in whole sentences after the incident at St Mungo's. He was unsure why Seraphim was growing more intelligent, but he was certain that the jacket would prove to be a disaster. From his studies in Muggle psychology, he had read of something disturbingly similar: the straight jacket. He didn't want his son to feel he was irredeemably insane. That was not a self-image from which one could easily recover.

"Let's go home," he spoke evenly to the broken alter when Neville fell silent.

Seraphim cocked his head, still glaring mistrustfully, but he was considering the offer. That was good enough for Severus. He turned to Neville and ruthlessly invaded his mind. He wanted to know what happened and wasn't about to ask questions where Augusta Longbottom would overhear. Neville's mind was unguarded. Severus wasn't looking for much, so it took less than three seconds. When he pulled out, Neville's legs buckled and he fell heavily to his knees. Augusta jumped to her feet, her wand aimed at Severus's torso.

"I am not the cause," Severus said coldly, glaring at her. "The child is merely tired. Even I can see as much."

Augusta turned to her grandson questioningly. Had it been anyone else she would have known something had occurred, but she was too familiar with Neville's clumsiness and general ineptitude. It
made her question her own instincts. "Are you well, Neville?"

"Yes, ma'am," Neville answered shakily. He gripped the edge of the couch and with some effort managed to get back on his feet. He felt sick and the floor was tilting under him. He leaned heavily on the armrest. "I haven't been sleeping or eating. I think it's just catching up to me."

Augusta frowned severely and Neville flushed. The combination of red and sickly green on his face wasn't a good one. Severus felt no sympathy, not with the knowledge of Neville’s rejection of Shadow’s sexuality burning in his brain.

"Shadow is obviously too unwell to travel," Augusta said, her voice hard. "My support doesn't come at so steep a price. I merely wish to understand the shape of the battlefield. Surely a man such as you can appreciate my position."

Severus regarded her silently. "And surely a woman of your intellect understands the dangers of revealing secrets carelessly."

"Then be gone," Augusta said icily. "Know you lost a formidable ally this day."

Severus inclined his head and turned his attention once more to Seraphim. "We must leave this place. It is not safe here. Do you understand?"

Seraphim regarded Augusta coldly. He stood and moved along the wall toward the door. Severus followed, but he was careful to leave a good space between them. Once they were outside and the door shut behind them with a slam, Severus led them away from the house and into the trees. Seraphim followed a good fifteen feet behind him. It was obvious the alter wouldn't allow physical contact. Severus would have been surprised had it been any different.

"Wait here," he said carefully. "I must procure a means home."

Seraphim said nothing.

"I mean it, Seraphim. You do not know the way and your ring is useless to you temporarily. Remember how hard it was to survive without help and shelter. You do not want to experience the same again." When Seraphim scowled at this statement that he could not survive independently, Severus pulled out his trump card. "Besides, you don't want to keep Draco waiting."

Seriously unhappy about it, Seraphim crouched obediently.

Relieved, Severus moved off a ways into the woods. He cast a few quick charms to ensure privacy so Seraphim could not hear him before closing his eyes and reaching out with his mind. He had his own portkey ring, but he had unfinished business before they went home. Standing with his back braced against the tree, he closed his eyes and reached with his mental powers, silently compelling a certain Gryffindor teen to respond to his call. He had a few things to say to Longbottom before they left.

Chapter end.
Coming to Terms with the Truth

Luna watched Lady Longbottom storm upstairs, presumably to her bedroom, after Professor Snape and Shadow took their leave. She was just settling on the couch when she heard a door creek softly open. She watched the stairs attentively and sure enough Neville came creeping quietly down them.

"Where are you going?"

"I need some fresh air," he muttered and opened the front door. The sky was just barely lightening with dawn. It was still too dark to see easily and he stumbled a bit on the icy, slippery path.

"Two weeks more until the moon is full," Luna said dreamily, her eyes on the sky. "You know... In some places, the moon always shines bright. It is a dark place that cannot afford to lose even a little light, so the moon remains always full."

Neville didn't respond. He reached the woods on the edge of their property and made his way under the dark canopy. He was walking blind now, but he knew his place and his steps were confident. Luna slowly fell behind, her footing not as sure. Suddenly Neville was flung up against a tree. His breath whooshed out of him and he gasped as he was painfully leveled up off the ground, his back scraping along the bark. White light burst into existence, casting sharp shadows across his attacker's face.

"Professor!"

"Let me make myself clear," Severus said, his voice like velvet and his wand trained on the helpless teen. "I will not allow you to torture my son with your insecurities."

"What?" Neville sputtered.

"Shadow has endured enough pain that I will not allow your crippled worldview to shatter the little happiness he has managed to salvage from the wreck of his life!"

"I don't understand!" Neville cried, helpless tears burning his eyes.

"Oh, I think you do," Severus crooned, stepping closer and gently caressing the Gryffindor's cheek with his wand, "Get over yourself, Longbottom. Your singular experience does not define everyone else. You are not equipped to wisely judge anyone."

"I don't understand how he could..." Neville pleaded weakly.

"I do not care," Severus bit out, cutting him off. "You do not need to understand it. All you need to understand is that I will not allow you to tear my son apart." Neville whimpered as the wand dug into his jaw. "If you spoil this for Shadow, I will devote myself to ensuring you suffer equally. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" Neville cried out desperately and was released. He crumpled, clenching his fists in the snow and dirt, he looked up at his teacher with tear-stained cheeks. "I don't w-want to h-hurt him. He's my b-brother. I love him."

Severus stared down at him with fathomless eyes. "And yet he disgusts you."
"He doesn't!"

"He's in love, Longbottom, with a young man who has supported him faithfully. They share something you cannot come close to comprehending. It's incomparable to your adolescent infatuation with Miss Weasley. I only tell you this much because, regrettably, your rejection could easily destroy what little hope he has."

Neville shook his head weakly.

"Stay away from my son until you have a better grip on your disgraceful prejudices or we will talk again."

"Yes, sir," Neville answered miserably, hanging his head.

He was so confused! His arms itched like mad, and as Severus walked away, taking the light with him, he summoned his razor. Tears burned down his cheeks and his hands shook so badly that he didn't dare make a cut yet. He almost severed a finger when Luna put a hand on his shoulder and he jumped.

"He must love Draco a lot," Luna muttered sympathetically.

"What?" Neville gasped, looking up at her horrified.

"If it's this hard for you to accept, it must be twice as hard for him. He has to actually feel it," she answered calmly. She reached down and gently took the cutting blade from his trembling fingers. "So he must really, really love Draco."

The sun turned the sky a faint pink. Neville could hardly breathe. He reached for the razor, his eyes begging. "Please, Luna. Can I have that back? Just for a moment?" His teeth were beginning to chatter.

"Okay." Luna smiled and smoothly rolled her sleeve up.

Neville frowned in confusion. He gasped as she brought the blade across her forearm. Blood instantly filled the cut and spilled over, trickling down her pale skin and falling onto the snow. Neville felt the memories of similar cuts flood through his brain and a euphoric wave of relief followed. He looked up at Luna's face. Her expression was serene as she held his gaze. Instantly he felt sickened.

"Don't," he begged, reaching for her.

"Do you need another?" she asked, stepping back.

"No!" Although he did. His arms screamed for it. He needed more. "Just give it to me!"

Luna tilted her head as she studied his flushed face. She daintily made another cut parallel to the first. Neville watched helplessly, ensnared by her soft hiss of pain, the sight of the blood, the remembered feel of the small sting taking over every thought in his mind until it all stopped and faded away into nothingness...

Then like a wave, the comfort receded and he needed more. Just one more cut to keep the empty cocoon wrapped tightly around him, to keep it from unraveling too soon. His nails dug into his forearms unconsciously and Luna made a third cut. Neville sighed even as he felt horrified that his friend was hurting herself right in front of him.
"Why?" he whispered, more ashamed than he had ever felt in his life. He forced his eyes to close, erasing the perfect bleeding lines. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because it hurts," Luna answered as she examined the cuts she had made. "I don't want you to hurt yourself anymore, Neville."

Neville grabbed her hand and pulled. She knelt before him and was wrapped up in a desperate hug. She hugged him back. The cold snow smelled fresh and soon she couldn't even feel the cuts on her arm. The sky brightened to yellow, then blue. It was a gorgeous day. Luna smiled, her head resting against Neville's.

Neville pulled away after several long minutes. He was still shaken but was much calmer. He gently took her arm in his hands and pulled out his wand, incanting the healing charms he had become quite proficient in casting.

She smiled at him gratefully. "That feels much better. Thank you."

"Don't do that again," he said softly, urgently. Suddenly the idea of Luna hurting herself was worse than anything he could imagine. He never wanted to see her bleeding ever again. He stared into her blue eyes, needing her to see how serious he was.

"Okay. You either," she said and kissed him on his nose.

Neville blinked, utterly surprised.

Luna laughed at his expression and stood. She turned in a circle, her robes swirling around her. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

Neville couldn't help it. He smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, it is." And unexpectedly the calm cocoon was falling around him, but instead of being cold and numb like after cutting, he felt so very warm.

Getting to his feet, he looked down at the smiling girl. She twirled again and, with a flick of her wand, sent snow spraying up into his face. Sputtering, Neville stretched his Earth sense. The tree above her stretched and a foot of snow fell on top of her head. Luna shrieked with laughter. Neville didn't quite have it in him to laugh with her, but he did feel his shoulders loosen and a pressure lift from his chest.

xXx

Seraphim entered the house after Severus. He smiled as he caught the shocked expression on a dark-haired stranger's face, but the smile dimmed when he saw equal distress on Draco's. He didn't like the look. He had sworn to himself while he had lived in the dark place that he would prevent Boy from ever suffering again.

Moving forward, Seraphim walked wide of both adults. Stepping up to the blond, he shoved Draco hard with his magic.

Draco staggered, gasping in surprise. He stared at Seraphim with wide eyes, instantly afraid he the alter was angry with him, but Seraphim was smiling at him, his green eyes sparkling with innocent happiness as he huffed a breathy laugh, the only laugh he was capable of - the action so foreign to his abused psyche.

"Magic's back," Seraphim confirmed, hoping the blond would be reassured. He could protect them again.
Draco grinned. He almost reached out to hug him, but he stopped the motion before actually doing so. He knew it would only upset Seraphim, who avoided human contact. "That's wonderful news, Seph!" he said excitedly.

Seraphim hummed, obviously quite pleased.

Draco was shocked that the alter was so comfortable and expressive with the two adults still in the hall with them and watching his every move. Usually Seraphim was tense, mistrustful, and hateful around others, so he was almost reassured as Seraphim jerked his chin in the direction of the stairs, making it obvious he wanted them to retreat to the bedroom.

"Wait, Seraphim," Severus called. "We have one more place to go. We just came to retrieve Draco."

"What about me?" Sirius asked faintly. He was still staring at his godson. Twelve years in prison had given him a healthy dose of claustrophobia and the binding jacket horrified him.

"You have stores to visit, do you not?" Severus sneered, referring to the locket they still needed to find.

Seraphim frowned. "I don't want to go."

"We must," Severus insisted, but he had no idea how to get the alter to comply. He couldn't very well claim the house wasn't safe. He wanted Seraphim to feel comfortable here.

"There is a secret place that I want to visit," Draco spoke up. Seraphim turned and looked up at him unhappily. "We can come back here right after. Please, Seph? I really need to get something from Hogwarts."

"You want to go?" Seraphim asked, tilting his head curiously.

"Yes. There's something I need there and no one else knows the place exists."

Seraphim liked the sound of that. He didn't like moving around so much, but on the other hand he felt a bit protected from the world within the new jacket. Finally, he sighed and nodded his head.
"Okay. But just us. They stay."

"I need Severus's help with something, Seph." Draco stared beseechingly at him.

Seraphim scowled at that. "I'll help you."

"It's for a potion. Do you know how to make a potion?" Draco asked a bit desperately.

Seraphim looked the greasy-haired man up and down. "Fine," he bit out. "But I will hurt you if you do anything to either of us."

"I understand," Severus said with some relief. He turned and led the way back outside.

Draco smiled at Seraphim warmly and the alter smiled tentatively back.

Sirius followed them outside and disappeared with a sharp crack without saying anything more. The sound startled Seraphim who glared at the spot he had been standing in. Severus stared at his son in consternation. Now they had another problem. He didn't have a portkey to Hogwarts. They would have to Apparate.

"I think I can manage Seph and myself," Draco offered.
Severus didn't like that idea - What if the two got splinched? Or Draco misjudged the arriving location? - but he knew Seraphim wasn't about to let him touch him where as he might let Draco.

Draco turned to his friend and met his eyes seriously. "I need to touch you, but it will be quick, I promise. We're going to use magic to take us to Hogwarts really fast, and I need to touch you to bring you with us. Okay?"

Seraphim shifted he weight on his feet nervously. He looked at Severus suspiciously. "Go first."

Severus nodded and Apparated away.

Seraphim jumped at the noise again and his scowl deepened. Looking at Draco sideways, he said, "We could go now. Go where no one will hurt us."

Draco smiled sadly. "I don't think any such place exists. Besides, I need something from Hogwarts. Please, Seph?"

Sighing, Seraphim stepped up toward the blond and leaned his shoulder against the Slytherin's. Draco very carefully put his arm around the thin shoulders and closed his eyes, trying to ignore Seraphim's flinch. He pictured the Forbidden Forest as clearly as he could and jumped.

xXx

Fudge slammed the folders he was holding down on his desk with such violence that papers exploded everywhere. "I don't understand how they could just disappear!" he raged. "It's only one man, for Merlin's sake!"

"Every Auror has the search as their top priority. Surely they will be found soon," Umbridge tried to reassure him.

"It's been four days since You-Know-Who freed his followers from Azkaban! I need to talk to Snape! He saw the man come back, and I'm still not certain he had nothing to do with it. He probably told us You-Know-Who had arisen because he knew we wouldn't believe it when he was the source!"

"It's a plot, certainly," Umbridge agreed, her eyes darkening. "We've been holding the Wizarding Child Services interview in reserve for just this moment. It won't be hard to find Professor Snape unfit and take custody of young Shadow. He won't dare go against us once we have his son."

"How did he get out of that monitoring anklet?" Fudge demanded, spinning around and getting into her face. "You assured me that was impossible!"

"I - " She stared at her hero with wide eyes. "I'm so sorry, Minister! That's what I was told!"

Snarling, Fudge went to his seat and collapsed into it. "The papers are going mad. They're blaming us for not knowing sooner, for not preparing on the testimony of that - that - criminal! Why would we take such dribble seriously? No. We need to find Snape and interrogate him. He knows something without a doubt! Then we will have progress at last."

"It will be done as you say, Minister," Umbridge simpered. She was about to say more when there was a knock at the office door.

"Come in!" Fudge yelled.

"Sir!" A young man stepped into the room and saluted crisply.
"Auror Whitman." Fudge perked up and leaned across his desk. "Have you found him?"

"A man was overheard talking about someone who meets Shadow Snape's description, Minister. His name is Stan Shunpike and is the conductor of the Knight's Bus."

"Excellent!" Fudge cried. The Auror saluted again and left, shutting the sound-proof door behind him. "Dolores, I trust you can handle his interrogation. Get me something I can use! I'm going to inform the public that we've finally apprehended a dangerous Death Eater. It will reassure them and perhaps buy us time."

"You can count on me, Minister," Umbridge vowed and hurried after the Auror, her eyes gone cold and cruel.

xXx

Lucius sat propped up on pillows. He stared at the balcony doors across from him with cold blue eyes. He would make it that far today. He was sick of wasting away in bed and weakness. For the first time in months, Lucius felt coherent. It was like waking from some horrible nightmare. The graveyard had unhinged him.

At the sight of Potter, completely deranged with no check on his magic whatsoever, he had come face to face with something too terrible to comprehend. He had been driven by sheer terror and desperation to find protection against this thing Potter had become. It was like looking in the face of a natural disaster. There was nothing to reason with. Potter had become a force of pure death, capable only of the destruction of everything.

Lucius had witnessed allies being shredded and struck down as if they were mere insects. He had seen his newly reborn - and probably fragile Lord - crushed with pure malevolent magic. Lucius had needed a defense against such fearsome power. So he had decided that he needed to restore his Lord, no matter the cost, no matter it would irrevocably tie his fate with his Lord’s.

And he was betrayed. His son, his Heir, had betrayed him. He had not expected to find Draco with the Snape brat at the Department of Mysteries. He especially had not expected Draco to defy him in front of all and sundry and to literally break the prophecy he had been sent to fetch for his Lord - a very dangerous and unstable Lord as was proven by the severe punishment he had suffered at his return. How could Draco turn his back so completely on his family? It was inconceivable! He could only assume that Snape - the word was infused with such disgust and hatred that it sounded like a foul epithet instead of a name - had brainwashed the little fool.

Strengthened by his deep outrage, Lucius flung the heavy comforter off his legs and slowly sat up, slipping his feet to the carpeted floor. He stood. The muscles in his calves and lower back spasmed, sharp agony like a hot knife twisting viciously in those places, but he couldn't bear it for Draco's treachery to go unpunished for a day, hour, minute longer than it already had.

"Lucius," Narcissa said expressionlessly. "The healer instructed you remain in bed for at least a week."

"Do not tell me, woman," he hissed viciously, pale and shaking with both pain and rage. "It's not as if you will see to that disgraceful boy."

Narcissa felt fear spread through her chest and enter her limbs. Her fingers began to tremble and she casually clasped them in front of her to hide it. She had hoped Lucius would be manageable about this, but the cold rage in his eyes was neither insane nor malleable. Lucius would have Draco's life for his betrayal.
Lucius swayed and sat heavily back on the bed. He clasped the sheets under his hand in a furious white-knuckled grip as he literally snarled.

Narcissa moved forward, her head tilted submissively. "I will not lie and say I am not distressed over the loss of my only child, but please, husband, rest. It can wait a few more days. You should not risk your health."

Soothed, Lucius fell back into bed and allowed Narcissa to cover him once more. "Tomorrow," he stated firmly. "Your son has until tomorrow."

Narcissa bowed her head in acquiescence. "May I write him a farewell? He does not deserve it, but it would soothe my grief."

"Yes." Lucius smiled sadistically. "Yes. Write him. Let him fret and grow wretched with fear and worry. Let him count the hours he has left. Write your letter, Cissa."

Narcissa nodded and calmly strode from the room. Her pace quickened as soon as she was out of her husband's sight. She hadn't much time.

xXx

Draco and Severus had been dissecting the basilisk since arriving at the Chamber. Draco had claimed that he needed parts of the basilisk for a potion and that was why they had come. Seraphim had been unimpressed, but he allowed it and had sat peacefully despite the hours slipping away, sitting in one of the sofa-chairs, his feet on the cushion with his knees up by his chin, his arms still wrapped around him in the straight-jacket. In truth, Salazar had been examining Seraphim and Shadow's minds since their arrival while Rowena examined his magic.

As for the basilisk, Severus had not been able to share Seraphim's apathy. His first view of the mighty serpent had taken his breath away. It was unimaginable how a small, scrawny twelve-year-old, regardless of it being Gabriel at the time, had been able to defeat such a fearsome creature. Then he had considered the priceless value of the corpse - dozen of potions leapt to mind in which they would be useful - and his horror had transformed into delight.

When asked where the eyes, tongue, and the venom sacks were, Draco had gestured at a large green box tied with a silver bow and said, "The eyes were destroyed in the battle, but the teeth, tongue, and venom sacks are there. It was to be your Christmas present, but we forgot it in all the excitement over Mr. Weasley and everything else that happened since the end of term."

Severus had been deeply touched at his son's thoughtfulness and care. The gift was truly priceless. His eyes had darted in that direction and he felt a sharp pang when green eyes lazily met his own. He missed Shadow. Draco had seemed to understand where his thoughts had led him and didn't remark on his sudden silence. Severus was thankful for that.

"Sir?" Draco asked, breaking the silence for the first time in almost five hours. He had been diligently removing scales one by one and placing them in jars. He stood with his white sleeves rolled up, his hands slimy up to the wrist, his fingers bleeding in a few places from delicate cuts. Severus was surprised the aristocrat had been so willing to do such a physically demanding, not to mention messy, job, but seven large jars were already filled and Draco hadn't once complained.

Severus arched an eyebrow.

Taking that as permission, Draco continued in a soft voice. Seraphim had fallen asleep in the chair, his cheek resting on his knees, and he didn't want to wake him. "May I ask about the jacket?"
Severus was reluctant to speak of it. Just thinking about it made him grind his teeth, but the true concern in his Slytherin's voice persuaded him to say a little at least. "He is capable of shoving people out of his sphere of influence, but he is not able to stop a heart, for example. The idea was to prevent the wearer from being able to physically or magically fatally injure others." His face twisted into a dark sneer. "Inexplicably, he seems to have taken to the blasted thing."

"But why?" Draco demanded, horrified. It had been bad enough thinking the jacket merely restrained his friend physically, but magically as well? "He should hate something like that."

Frowning, Severus collected more blood into a vial, careful not to get the substance on his bare fingers. "I do not yet understand it myself."

Draco fell silent once again. He was intelligent enough to know that the implications weren't good. Seraphim's acceptance of the jacket probably represented some twisted logic that Draco would immediately hate. When Salazar and Rowena appeared behind Severus, he almost sighed in relief. He didn't want to have to imagine those reasons or what it said about Seraphim's poor mental health. He grimaced down at his filthy hands and quickly cast a few cleaning spells before rolling down his sleeves and going to his teacher's side.

"Things have progressed amazingly," Salazar began. His face was alight with excitement.

Rowena didn't look nearly as happy. "The poor boy," she said softly, gazing at the sleeping brunet off to the side. "I didn't understand much of that tangled mess, but an idiot could see he is injured and suffering."

"Suffering not nearly as much as he could be," Salazar immediately argued. His body language shifted completely and he looked almost aggressive as he balled his fists and glared at the female phantom. "It's a mark of his mental strength that he's as sane as he is. Had he not devised such an ingenious way of defending his mind, he'd be raving mad or more likely dead from suicide or drugs!"

"I'm not insulting the boy," Rowena answered crisply. She looked down her long nose at Salazar and crossed her arms forbiddingly. "I'm merely saying that it's sad he had to resort to such defenses in the first place!"

Salazar opened his mouth to respond, his face dark as a thundercloud, but Severus quickly intervened. "As enlightening as your different perspectives are, I'd appreciate an explanation of the situation before we debate which of you has a more valid view."

"Well," Rowena began when Salazar merely crossed his arms and sulked. "His magical core was severely drained performing some great magic. His body shut down that area of his brain that controls magical energy because stressing it much more would have killed him from magical shock. This means that he had no access to his magic while his magical channels healed. When he was no longer in danger of killing himself, that part of the brain switched back on. He's still recovering, however, and it may be a few weeks before he's back to full strength."

"Should he refrain from using magic until then?" Severus asked factually.

"As long as sticks to simple spells, it should not matter," Rowena reassured. "Though I'd stay away from larger workings if I were him. Sustained stress on an already bruised and sensitive brain can lead to breaking that area completely and render him unable to use magic or possibly dead if he goes into shock."

"Understood." Severus nodded once. "I appreciate you looking into the matter."
"No problem," Rowena said with a sweet smile. "I actually could tell all this instantly, but I must admit that I found his ability to access the dark plane and the light plane fascinating."

Severus lifted his eyebrows curiously.

"Do they teach you nothing about magic anymore?" Rowena grumbled. She sighed. "Magic is energy. Wizards and witches have the ability to access this ambient energy and direct it. It's like the brain's ability to hear sound and then translate it into words with meaning. There is a sixth sense, and the brain either translates this sense or it doesn't. And the finer control one has - like motor control, some people naturally have better aim or balance than others, while some must put forth effort and practice - the more magic they can direct without causing strain and injuring that area of the brain."

Draco's heart was rocketed in his chest. "So what about heredity?"

"Oh, no doubt magical ability is something that is inherited, just like any other physical attribute or talent," Rowena remarked, setting Draco's world view back into its proper place. "But genetics is a complicated thing. The magic gene," she giggled at the dumbed-down term, "can become recessive, creating Squibs. Muggles are essentially all Squibs themselves. They have recessive magic genes. When two people with the same recessive trait come together, it becomes dominant in the child twenty-five percent of the time. So every Muggle child has a twenty-five percent chance of being magical.

"Plus, because magic is usually recessive in Muggle lines, Muggleborns have magic in both their recessive and dominant alleles. That means their children, one hundred percent of the time, are assured to have dominant magical genes when paired with a wizard. That's why Muggleborns never have Squibs, while Squibs are actually fairly common in a Pureblooded wizarding line. You see, two people with dominant magic genes also have non-magic recessive genes, so every child of theirs has a twenty-five percent chance of being a Squib."

Draco looked horrified by this news. His face blanched of all color and his hands trembled slightly. Rowena continued, oblivious.

"We all come from Muggles, but as we grew in number and mated only with magical partners, the magical community grew, but the magic gene weakens as it is replicated repeatedly thus the need to bring recessive non-magical genes to the fore and make them dominant and a Squib is born. This allows the integrity of the gene to be repaired, so that it's stronger when it becomes dominant again. That's why Squibs are also good breeding candidates, but not quite as good as a Muggleborn. Due to this, Muggleborns were raised to prominence in the past. They were prized breeding partners.

"But then the magical community got too close to the Muggles through the Muggleborns and that mess with the Muggles happened." Rowena sighed sadly, her eyes gazing into the distance. Salazar snorted at her while Draco looked almost desperately hopeful once again. "So much of our knowledge was lost and we were scattered for awhile. By the time the magical community had reestablished itself, there was a fear of Muggles and it translated to Muggleborns since many had forgotten or ignored why Muggleborns were so important in the first place."

Draco could only stare dumbly as she completely shattered his perceptions of the world for good. This went against almost everything he had been taught. She seemed puzzled by his shock and frowned in concern, but Severus had about reached his explosion point. If they didn't get back to the pertinent topic, he was going to strangle someone.

"About this dark and light plane," he prompted.

"Oh, yes," Rowena said with a smile. "That's where I was going with this. So, as I was trying to tell
you, magic is an invisible energy that fills the air and surrounds the whole world, and only those with a dominant magic gene can utilize this sixth sense. Well, this energy is mostly neutral, but there are two other purer types of energy. Despite the genetic ability, we are not able to manipulate them. These energies are too… something." She frowned. "We never could decide if they were too heavy, fast, or if they perhaps existed at a higher or lower frequency than the neutral energy."

"I understand they are different," Severus grated and flicked his fingers impatiently. He was afraid of another dissertation that didn't pertain to his son. "Go on."

"Well, these two energies are considered dark and light. The dark magic is pure chaos energy and can be used to destroy, unravel, or completely muck up physical matter. Light magic is pure creative energy. It can stabilize, support, and re-create physical matter. These energies were the original source of the terms Light and Dark magic. By deciding if a spell was closer to chaotic energy or creative energy, it was classified as either Light or Dark, but really all spells are neutral magic because we cannot manipulate or access the chaotic or creative energies. Then slowly over time as fewer and fewer wizards and witches could access these two planes, the terms lost their original meaning and began to have moral connotations; Light meaning good and Dark bad.

"But the truth is, you can't have creation without destruction, and after destruction something is always created in its place. Chaotic energy is neither good nor bad and neither is creative energy. The world is formed of these two energies and continues in a cycle of birth and re-birth. These particles are scattered evenly throughout the neutral magic. We draw on the neutral energies alone because we cannot handle the purer energy forms, but occasionally one will come along who does have the ability to manipulate the dark plane or light plane of energies, and thus they can direct supremely powerful and unadulterated magic."

"It's because he psychologically resonates with the dark and light energies that he can use them," Salazar piped in. "You see, obviously Demon's psyche was tuned with destruction as he was shaped by the Darkest magic capable for a normal wizard and fed destructive emotions. Boy wasn't created with Light magic, but his mind was obsessed with setting things right. He believed by suffering he could appease his Uncle and thus the universe, and so he suffered willingly so that order would be restored. That desire to set things right and the obsession with healing the destruction to his body allowed him to access the light plane. There were literally no destructive thoughts in his mind and no destructive emotions in his heart or it would have been impossible."

"You can see how rare that would be," Rowena said excitedly, looking back and forth between the two solemn Slytherins. "Usually either one or the other of the two mental and physical states are achieved. Never in history that I'm aware of has a single person been able to access both planes at once, and this child is able to do that. He is very, very special."

"That's what I'm trying to say!" Salazar cried angrily. "His condition isn't a pity. It's not something you should feel is unfortunate to have happened. It's a bloody miracle!"

"So you're saying we should force our children to suffer just to achieve this state?" Rowena snapped furiously. She marched right over to the male phantom and stared him down. "Not only is that cruel and barbaric, but what would be the point? I hardly doubt his condition imparts happiness. What would the world do with a multitude of people with such formidable powers anyway? It would be the end of civilization! Hardly a pleasant future."

"Power is not synonymous with evil!" Salazar hissed furiously. "And I hardly said we should torture children, but if we studied the condition, we could perhaps recreate it without such stress!"

"Enough!" Severus barked and the two phantoms blinked up at him almost as if they had forgotten he was there. "You can quibble with yourselves for eternity, but first you will tell me about my son."
"I don't think I have anymore to say," Rowena said stiffly, shooting another glare at Salazar. She looked to the humans for reinforcement and huffed when she met blank expressions. Draco was even a tad green around the edges. Disappointed that they didn't appreciate her knowledge and didn't stand with her against Salazar's lunacy, she twirled angrily and stalked away from them, disappearing completely on her fifth step.

"Finally!" Salazar exploded, flinging his hands in the air. "She never shuts up! Never has and never will!" He turned his attention to Severus and smiled. "Now let's talk about what's really important."

"You mentioned he was progressing," Severus reminded. "His condition is improving?"

"By improving, I take it to mean you are, like Rowena, hoping he overcomes his dissociative identity disorder and becomes 'normal'," Salazar said with a real pout.

"You can take it I mean that, yes." Severus's voice was so cold that Draco glanced down idly to see if ice shards had fallen.

"Then I suppose you can take that by progress I mean evolving." Salazar smiled smugly, pleased with himself and his cleverness.

"Sal - a - zar," Severus enunciated very carefully as rage made his magic flare.

"Okay, okay!" Salazar huffed and rolled his eyes. "Basically the two personalities function as each other's subconscious. So Shadow's motivations, thoughts, and feelings act as Seraphim's subconscious, and vice versa. Seraphim's his own fully developed person psychologically, but Shadow still influences him slightly without Seraphim knowing it, just as we all have a subconscious that influences us."

Salazar slowly grew more and more animated as he continued. His arms and hands flashed around him as he talked and his eyes kept straying to the sleeping teenager as if fascinated by what he saw. "This helps explain Seraphim's fondness of the jacket - which is due in part to Shadow's passionate conviction that Seraphim needs to be restrained, but also due to the fact that it reminds Seraphim of the cupboard which was always a safe and comforting place for him where no one ever came in after him because they were too big and also they found him disgusting. Shadow's love for his friends and family explain why Seraphim hesitates to kill those Shadow cares for. This also explains why he is growing more intelligent. He doesn't know what Shadow knows, therefore he doesn't have Shadow's knowledge, but he has the capability of reasoning things out for himself because he unconsciously accesses Shadow's intelligence."

"And the influence goes both ways. Seraphim's phobia of touch explains why Shadow avoids physical contact and will only seek out touch from those he trusts completely, but he gains something from Seraphim as well. He can now unconsciously access the dark and light planes of magic. Once his magical channels heal, he'll be just as powerful as Seraphim, though I must admit it will only function in times of desperate need. I don't think he'll ever have conscious control over it. His psychology just doesn't lend itself to the frequency of the two planes as Seraphim's does."

"So they are connected more closely than the other alters?" Severus asked. He wasn't quite sure what to make of all that the phantom was telling him.

"Not exactly," Salazar drawled slowly. "The other alters weren't as fully developed as separate identities. They didn't have the same opinions, but they thought in the same manner, and they had a shared knowledge base in which to make their own opinions. They also were united by agreeing to put Shadow first. Seraphim's thought process is vastly different from Shadow's, and he will see to his own survival before Shadow's. They really are like two separate people."
"But they aren't!" Severus snapped.

"No," Salazar agreed with a content grin. "They aren't different people. Shadow wouldn't have a fully functioning personality without Seraphim because then he would no longer have a subconscious and vice versa. They have a symbiotic relationship; meaning they have individual existences but are dependent on each other for survival. This is what allows Shadow to have access to the dark and light planes of magic. Without Seraphim, he'd not have that great power.

"That being said, they really are separate identities. If the two were to ever combine into one mind, Shadow's more dominant personality traits would merge with Seraphim's dominant traits, and their less strong and emphasized traits would merge and act as a unified subconscious. However, they both are precariously balanced as it is. The only reason Seraphim is as stable as he is - and he's not really all that stable, but trust me it could be worse - is because his mind is still simplistic.

"He has only two instincts to contend with and one of those urges is very submissive. His thought processes are still very childlike, but should he mature and grow, his more serious disorders, tensions, and psychological conflicts would appear in Shadow. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is just one example and possibly dementia since his reality centers would most likely be completely warped."

Severus glared at the phantom hatefully, infuriated by the idea that his son was incurable and must live with this condition for the rest of his life. "And merging would lose you your remarkable specimen, would it not?"

Salazar's playful and smug expression gave way to something scathing. "Certainly, were I human, it would be reasonable to question my motives for telling you that merging will never be practical between these two identities, but I am a phantom of this castle and I cannot lie to you. That is my educated diagnosis. I'd like to remind you that I tried to cure Boy as best I could despite it allowing for a potential merging. Had I left things alone, merging would have been inconceivable and left me with my specimen."

"It also gave you an excuse to more closely reside in and examine Shadow's mind," Severus sneered, dark eyes flashing.

"Fine. Don't believe me, you ungrateful bastard," Salazar hissed and disappeared without another word.

"Infuriating two founders all in one day," Draco said faintly, but his head was spinning with everything they had learned and he didn't really care at the moment.

"Yes. Well done, indeed," Severus sneered viciously and spun around with a sharp snap of his robes as he regarded the dead basilisk once more.

Everything in him wanted to deny Salazar's grim prognosis of Shadow's condition. It wasn't fair that Shadow would never be free of this awful burden! But then his Slytherin side resurfaced and he knew that life was not fair. It was absurdly naïve of him to think Shadow could get off scot-free after having experienced and suffered such horrors. In any case, just because merging may not be possible, it did not mean that they could not work out some way for Shadow to live peaceably with DID, and it did not mean that Shadow and Seraphim could not continue to get healthier individually.

"Shadow?" Draco asked softly as he noticed tears slipping out from under his love's closed eyes.

One blue, one green eye opened and Shadow looked over at them from behind his knees and wrapped inside a black straightjacket. Grief but also a strange calmness pervaded his expression. Severus strode over and sat in the second chair. He didn't want to touch him until he knew it was
welcome and he didn't want to tower over him, either.

Draco had no such reservations. He knelt before him and pulled Shadow into a fierce hug. Shadow dropped his legs and leaned into him as Severus released the spell on the jacket, returning it to its innocent and normal appearance. Shadow, arms now free, reached up to squeeze Draco once before pulling away.

Draco let him go and stood, taking a few steps back. "How long were you pretending to sleep?" he asked as he searched Shadow's expression.

"Since the phantoms left my head, I think," Shadow admitted. His pale hands came up and ran fitfully through his messy curls. "I'm sorry. I snapped. I know I shouldn't have left the house and I truly regret going to Neville's in that state. I wasn't thinking clearly. I guess I was afraid to come and hear about my condition. It would make it real, I suppose, but it wasn't so bad, really. At least we got good news with the bad." He laughed weakly.

"Shadow," Severus said gently and captured his son's hands as the teen tugged at his sleeves anxiously.

"It was immature and I let my emotions take over." Shadow couldn't meet his father's eyes or Draco's. Instead he stared at Severus's hands where they clasped his. "I wish I could take it back, but I can't. All I can do is promise to try and think more rationally before acting. I'm Slytherin, after all."

Severus squeezed his fingers. "You had every reason to have a moment of hysterics, Shadow. We do not look down on you for that momentary weakness. We all have them. I would only wish that you felt you could have unburdened to us."

Shadow nodded and took a deep breath. He lifted his head and met Draco's eyes. Then he held his father's dark, accepting gaze somberly. "It won't happen again. I want to go apologize to Neville as well if that's okay. Or you could bring him here briefly. I realize that it's dangerous, but I will feel… badly until I can see him," he understated. He had no idea what word to use. Ashamed? Wretched? He really needed to apologize to his brother.

Severus considered for a long minute. "Let's return to the house. I will fetch him there later."

"Thank you." Shadow smiled and stood. "My portkey or yours?"

"Do not thank me," Severus grumbled and pulled Shadow into a loose embrace.

He efficiently pricked his thumb as Draco firmly clasped Shadow's shoulder. He activated his ring, and if he held a little tighter than necessary to his son, Shadow didn't complain. He rested his forehead against his father's collarbone and firmly grasped his robe as the world melted away.

Landing, Shadow pulled away from his father. Right in front of them, hanging on the wall, was a framed silver ring. He smiled; it was just like the one in his bedroom. In the corner, there was a large, dark armoire. The carvings on the door were exquisite. A four poster bed stood in the center. Shadow expected the covers to be green, but they were dark blue. The thick carpet under their feet was a surprisingly pale cream color.

The walls were wallpapered, royal blue with cobalt diamonds. Hanging on the wall opposite the bed was a ten inch picture of Amalia sitting on the couch in the sitting room and holding a giggling and waving baby. To the right of it was a picture of Shadow opening birthday presents in the parlor. It was his thirteenth birthday and he looked like Harry Potter, but to the left of Amalia's picture there was a second one of him dueling Draco and he looked as he did now with curly hair and
heterochromatic eyes.

The fact that the pictures shared the same space as Amalia and Tabitha filled Shadow with too much emotion to name. Especially because Severus had also included a picture of when he was Harry Potter. He knew how much Severus hated James, but this proved that the man had accepted him. All of him. Closing his eyes to hide the sudden tears, he turned blindly to the door and walked forward.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked anxiously. He carefully grabbed Shadow's arm and guided him out of the room.

Severus remained behind. He understood that Shadow needed a minute to collect himself. Besides, he had a letter to write.

"Nothing." Shadow shook his head weakly.

Draco's expression hardened and his eyes flashed silver. His grip tightened and he pulled Shadow to the dueling room. Shadow didn't protest. He was having a hard enough time exerting control over his emotions and didn't have the energy to spare arguing or questioning his Slytherin friend.

Entering the room, Draco pushed Shadow forward and firmly shut the door behind them. "I'm sick of this," he began, his voice hard and low.

Shadow spun around, instantly hurt and angry. "Well, excuse me, Draco, for being such a mess!"

"Fuck that!" Draco yelled and stormed up to his crush. Shadow braced himself defensively and his wand snapped up. "I'm not talking about that! I'm talking about you constantly hiding your thoughts from me. That's what caused that breakdown earlier. You can't just push them away. You have to deal with them or they'll flood out when you least expect it. Every Slytherin knows that a mask is only temporary. You have to take it off eventually or it will shatter. Do you trust me enough for that or don't you?" He spread his arms wide, demonstrating his lack of wand, inviting Shadow to curse him.

"It's not about trusting you, Draco," Shadow hissed, eyes narrowed dangerously. "I messed up. It won't happen again. Just leave it alone, okay? I don't want to talk about it."

"You never want to talk about it and you'll keep breaking down until you stop shoving stuff inside and not letting it show."

Shadow took a shaky breath and lowered his wand. "We have bigger things to worry about. The Horcruxes for one. It doesn't matter."

Draco grabbed him by the collar, his knuckles white. "It matters to me," he growled furiously.

Shadow laughed. He lifted his hands and gently covered Draco's. "God. We're being stupid. Let me go."

Surprised, Draco did so. He brushed at his sleeves and patted his slicked-back hair trying to calm himself, but his eyes still smoldered and he stared at Shadow expectantly.

Shadow sighed. "Look. I'm not sure what I think about everything right now. I need time to digest it. We've learned a lot, you know?" He ran his hands through his messy curls. It was becoming a nervous habit.

"Yeah. I know what you mean," Draco agreed softly. "What Rowena said… I admit it shocked me."
"I'm sure." Shadow looked around the room, avoiding the tired and lost expression on the blond's face. He couldn't even imagine how hard everything was for Draco right now. He'd rebelled against his family, defied his father, abandoned his mother, placed himself against a madman and his army, and had just learned that what he knew about magic and bloodlines was wrong. Shadow wasn't the only one with issues.

Draco smiled, seeing Shadow's empathetic expression, and reached out and touched his shoulder. "Hey. We'll make it through this crap. We just have to keep it all in perspective. What matters is that we're in this together. All of us."

Shadow nodded his head, his throat too tight to speak. Draco was right. What mattered was that he wasn't alone anymore. Severus, Draco, Neville, Sirius, Remus, and even the twins; he had people to stand by him. Everything else would just have to work out or not. They'd learn to cope.

As he watched the deep emotions pass over Shadow's face, Draco's breath quickened. All the stress and chaos left them both tightly wound and it ratcheted up his need. Draco wanted him unbearably. Sliding his hand along the slender shoulder, Draco's fingers curled almost possessively across the back of Shadow's neck. Soft, black curls fell across his hand and the silky texture was too wonderful to resist. He ran his fingers up and through those beautiful curls.

Shadow's eyes widened and he stood tense as he felt Draco's nails scrape gently along his scalp and then the long fingers cupped the back of his head. He could hardly breathe. Conflicting impulses warred viciously behind his eyes as Draco took a bold step forward, then another. They were standing in front of each other now, only inches apart.

Shadow was panting. He wanted this. It felt so good. He wanted to know, intimately and inarguably, that Draco was with him. That at least this one thing in his life wouldn't change no matter what. It felt good after everything to just let go and simply exist for a moment, to feel adrenaline without terror and to just feel alive, but it felt too good and that sent anxiety shivering through him.

This was so fucking messed up. It was wrong, for him especially, to feel this way about another boy. Neville's horrified expression filled his mind's eye and he began to tremble. Confused, angry at himself, excited, Shadow stood motionless.

Draco saw the fear and desire as clearly as if Shadow had spoken out loud and he was suddenly furious that Shadow found it so hard to accept comfort. That he had been hurt so badly that he didn't know what to do with love. Draco used the hand still entwined in Shadow's hair to pull him forward and crush their mouths together almost violently.

Shadow gasped as slight pain flashed through him, grounded him. Then Draco's mouth was soothing his bitten lip, his tongue slipping into the opening he had presented and brushing across his palate. Shivering, Shadow moaned and clutched at Draco's shoulders desperately hard. Draco's free arm slid around his back and down to his waist, yanking their hips together. They shared a groan and Shadow sucked hard on Draco's tongue as the blond's fingers dug into his hip, sparks of pain and pleasure sizzling, making his toes curl.

Suddenly they were attacking each other. Cloth tore. Shadow lost control of his empathy and Draco's exhilaration fed his own. Draco's back hit the door and their teeth sunk into swollen lips. They were thrusting, the friction almost painful within their pants, but it was way too good to stop. Conscious thought evaporated and all that existed was the fever they had created between them.

Draco thrust up against him fast and hard, his dick a rigid line cradled in the dip of Shadow’s hip and groin. Shadow mirrored him. His long, pale fingers were pressed on either side of Draco’s head. He was practically eating Draco’s face and every small nip and hard suck, every brush of Draco’s
tongue along the soft tissue of his mouth, made him shake and tremble, his cock throbbing hot. Sharp shocks of pleasure zapped up his spine, made his nipple tingle as his shirt rubbed against them. His skin flushed red as he rubbed and thrust against Draco’s hip and groin.

Draco held him almost painfully tight, his fingertips almost bruising as they clutched at his shoulder blades and tugged at his hair. Shadow moaned, deep in his throat, gasping for air, he couldn’t breathe and something was coming, washing over him, making him shake and shiver, and he thrust even more widely against the blond. Draco’s hips hit the door again and again, thumping as they almost fought against each other.

Shadow arched, his mouth breaking away as he cried out, hoarse and breathless. Draco buried his face into his exposed throat, tasting the salty sweat beaded there as his own orgasm rocked him to his knees. They sank down together, both shaking and desperately trying to breathe. As the high dissipated, Shadow closed his empathy and tried to bring the world back into focus. His whole body throbbed and he just wanted to melt away.

Draco fell onto his butt and pulled Shadow more comfortably into his lap, hands shaking violently. Shadow’s head rested trustingly on his shoulder, sweaty forehead pressed against Draco’s neck. Draco struggled to catch his breath, his dick on fire as it softened in the moist confines of his pants. It had been rubbed almost raw.

*Dear Merlin, what did I do?* Draco thought, panicked as he held Shadow to his chest. He realized Shadow was crying and he began to hyperventilate as terror seared through his brain. *WHAT HAVE I DONE?*

"I…" Shadow's voice was rough and husky. Draco felt his heart ache even through the panic and fear. "God, Draco…"

"I'm sorry," he pleaded, sounding utterly pathetic. "I'm sorry, Shadow, please. I didn't mean…"

Shadow pulled away from Draco and smiled shakily into his beautifully flushed face. "God, don't apologize… It's okay, I'm fine… Just… give me a minute."

"Shadow?" Draco asked carefully, trying to establish eye contact.

"That was…" Shadow took a deep breath. He reached up and wiped at his eyes, but he couldn't continue.

"What?" Draco asked softly, gently caressing Shadow's warm, damp cheek.

Shadow shook his head, helpless to explain. He felt boneless and relaxed and like something inside of him had given way just a little bit. For a few moments all his problems and all the world’s problems had disappeared and it was all about physical needs and satisfaction. It felt good. It felt dirty, too, but for the moment he didn't even care because it felt so damn good.

Draco smiled sadly and kissed his love's swollen lips. The taste of copper blended with the taste of Shadow and he licked gently at the small cut he'd made earlier. Pulling away reluctantly, he ran his hands through the thick curls, trying to tame the tangled mess. "Come on. I'm starving. We missed breakfast and you hardly touched dinner last night."

Shadow nodded, smiling faintly back. He tried to stand, but didn't get more than a few inches off the ground. He could hardly move; his muscles felt like melted wax, warm and weak.

Draco chuckled and together they managed to get to their feet. He subtly cast cleaning charms on them and had to swallow his laughter as Shadow blushed red with shy embarrassment. Draco took a
firm grip of his hand and savored his still fizzing nerves as they made their way to the kitchen. He couldn't conceal his grin, however, when he realized that Shadow was holding on just as tightly as he was.

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Remus straightened his robes and brought his hand up to knock on the heavy door. He waited a minute before Augusta opened it. He smiled at her, hoping she'd let him in. No such luck. She regarded him sternly and didn't move to open the door wider in welcome.

"Are you here for the Order?" she demanded coldly.

"No, Madam, I'm here to check on my student. School starts in a week and I wanted to come by and see if he needed help with any of his homework. They don't know I'm here," Remus told her honestly. After getting Severus's letter, he had asked Minerva for a few days to rest and had been granted leave.

"Very well," Augusta sniffed and allowed him in. "He's been in his room all day. Missed lunch and breakfast."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Augusta waved her hand toward the stairs in permission and turned back to the sitting room where she had been doing some reading. Remus moved up the stairs, trying to gather his thoughts. Bracing himself, he knocked on the door. Not hearing an answer, he pushed it open.

Neville sat at his desk, staring out the window. He had dark circles under his eyes and he looked drawn. Remus wanted desperately to help him, but he didn't know what else he could do. Walking across the room, he put a hand on the teen's shoulder. He sniffed the air delicately. There was no scent of blood and he relaxed a bit at that.

"Remus," Neville greeted dully not turning around to look at him.

"Nev…" Remus crouched down and turned the chair, forcing the Gryffindor to face him. "I'm sorry about earlier. It must have been really upsetting, but you did well. You calmed Seraphim down and got him back to Severus."

Neville nodded vaguely, his gaze on the hands clasped in his lap.

"Talk to me, cub," Remus begged.

"What else did he tell you?" Neville asked, voice empty and hollow.

"He told me that Shadow wants to see you, but he's concerned that neither of you are ready for another confrontation," Remus said diplomatically.

Neville snorted at that, knowing very well the Potions Master would not have said it so kindly. Remus was about to say something else when there was a knock at the door. He stood as Augusta stepped in, her face harder than he had ever seen it before.

"Neville, come downstairs," she ordered and left the doorway.

Neville glanced up at Remus, but the werewolf only shrugged. He didn't know what was going on either. Together they moved downstairs, but they slowed when they saw three Aurors in uniform standing in the foyer. All three turned and watched them descend with hard, evaluating gazes.
Augusta stood tall and regal before them while old Uncle Algie stood in the doorway to the sitting room scowling.

"Neville was also present at the time of Shadow's arrival," Augusta said stiffly.

"Where was Mr. Lupin?" Auror Whitman asked suspiciously.

"The professor has only just arrived," Augusta answered coldly. She lifted an eyebrow and stared down the three men. "He tutors Neville during the summer."

"Very well. Now at what time and how did young Mr. Snape arrive?"

"It was about three this morning." Augusta shot her grandson a sharp glance when he looked about to protest. Neville felt the strength of that gaze and froze, trembling. Remus shifted closer to him, viciously suppressing the growl trying to rise in his throat. "I do not know his means of travel. I was awake and heard his steps in the snow outside the door. I opened it and let him in. I was unaware of any reason why I shouldn't. Is he wanted for some crime?"

"We are not at liberty to say, Madam," the second Auror answered.

"Why were you still awake at that hour?" Auror Whitman continued.

"My personal habits aren't in question, I should hope?"

"Of course not, Madam. I was just trying to establish if you were waiting for him."

"I was not. His visit was unexpected."

"Did you ask him why he had come?"

"No. He asked to see Neville and, as they are students together, I allowed it."

"Did he look distressed?"

"He seemed disturbed," Augusta allowed. "He must have been motivated by something to come visiting at such an hour."

"Did you see any injuries or notice his clothes were in disarray?"

"No."

"What did he want?" the Auror asked, turning his unyielding gaze to Neville.

The Gryffindor said nothing, just shook his head mutely while staring at his teacher and grandmother in appeal.

"Mr. Longbottom, I cannot stress the importance of your cooperation. This is a highly sensitive matter," the Auror said sharply, leaning forward a bit.

"We have done nothing wrong," Augusta stated and stepped between her grandson and the Auror's line of sight. "Shadow was up in Neville's room for about ten minutes before he came down. He was agitated and I had Neville write Professor Snape to come fetch his son. When the Professor arrived, I questioned him. He didn't answer my questions and took his son and left. We did not see how they traveled and we do not know where they went."

"With all due respect, Madam, we really need to know what the two boys talked about."
"I hardly see any respect here. You are treating us like common criminals. We are Longbottoms! From a long and noble line, of which many of us were Aurors. Not only am I offended, I am ashamed of your professional behavior."

"Let me make this clear. If any of you, including your grandson, know the whereabouts of the Snipes and withhold that information, you will be charged with conspiracy and impeding law enforcement officers. Such charges will result in a fine and possibly imprisonment."

"I do not appreciate your tone nor your not so subtle threats," Augusta said icily. "Neville, answer immediately so these men will leave our home at once."

"I don't know where they are and he didn't say where he came from," he answered softly but firmly. "He didn't say much. So I just talked about what I did this summer, waiting for him to tell me what he needed to, but he ran out of my room before he said anything."

"There you have it. Please leave." Augusta marched to the door and held it open.

The Aurors hesitated, but they turned and left the house. Augusta slammed it behind them and spun around, staring at her grandson.

Neville met her gaze and asked, "May I stay with Luna until school starts?" She had left that morning and he much rather stay with her than stay with his angry grandmother.

"Do as you wish, boy," she practically growled and stormed from the room.

Neville turned and hurried upstairs to pack.

Remus followed him, desperately worried. "I wonder how they knew he had come here."

"I don't know, but you'll warn him, won't you? I can find my own way to Luna's," Neville said as he flung things in his trunk.

"You do realize that when I tell Shadow you wouldn't come see him, he's going to think you hate him and that something is deeply wrong with him."

Neville froze and stared down at the clothes he had in his hands. Head hanging, he closed his eyes and tried to keep from screaming. Taking a few deep breaths, he turned and faced his mentor. He opened his eyes and Remus winced at the self-hate he saw. "I… Explain it to him somehow… No… Here. I'll write him a letter. Take it to him… I just… I can't see him. I don't want to hurt him and I don't have it settled in my head yet. Draco will be there and I just… I can't yet. Please?"

"Okay," Remus said softly and pulled the distressed teen into a hug. "It's going to work out, Neville. You'll see."

Neville nodded and hugged him back desperately. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"I know. I know, cub, and he knows it, too." Remus pushed him a bit away and smiled. "Write your letter. I'll help you pack."

"Thanks," Neville said softly and wiped at his eyes before picking up his quill to write a quick reassuring letter to his brother. His hand trembled a bit, but he forced his fingers steady as he wrote about what just happened with the Aurors and that he was going to stay with Luna until school started. He concluded it with, 'I'm sorry and I love you, brother. See you soon.' It was true, even if he couldn't deal with Draco and Shadow being together yet.
Shadow and Draco stepped into the kitchen. Sandwich makings were spread out on the counter. Three sandwiches were already made, a fourth sat on a cutting board, a knife sat to the side. It had only partially been cut in half, the task abandoned. Omi was nowhere in sight. Shadow frowned and called for the little elf. Nothing happened.

"He's with Severus. It's the only reason he wouldn't answer your summons," Draco said tightly, worry in his voice.

Shadow spun and ran for the stairs. "Something's wrong," he muttered darkly.

Draco agreed and chased after him.

They reached Severus's bedroom and found the door firmly shut. Shadow banged on it just as the whole house trembled and creaked before falling silent. Draco had his wand out and faced toward the stairs, guarding their backs. Shadow yelled for his father and jumped back startled as Omi appeared in front of him with a crack.

"Sirs! Master is resting," the elf informed them.

"What happened?" Shadow demanded. When Omi seemed to hesitate, Shadow knelt and grabbed the elf's smock. "Tell me. That's my father in there."

"I sensed magic outside and informed Master as I is told," Omi said in a wavering voice. "Master looked with a magic glass and saw Aurors searching the area and the village. He undid some of the magic on the house, so's we not where the Aurors can find us. It be hard work and Master now very tired. I is ordered not to let either young sirs go outside, but you may look out a window if you wish."

Shadow ran back downstairs, Draco at his heels, and flung open the curtains of the nearest window. A completely different landscape met his eyes. They were definitely not in England anymore. When you stepped into the house from England, you were really stepping into an identical house in Italy; that was why Draco told his father during the summer that he was with Blaise Zabini's family and why Lucius was never suspicious. Draco really was in Italy while he was in the house, but Severus had just removed the spell that connected the two houses. The searchers in England would only find an abandoned rundown house now and find no residue of magic, except for whatever they had done outside.

"How did they find us?" Draco frowned at the green landscape and cold blue sky. In England, there was snow on the ground and grey skies.

Shadow clenched his fists on the windowsill. "I led them here." Draco glanced sharply at his friend. "I summoned the Knight's Bus and took it to Neville's."

"That would do it." Draco nodded and straightened. "We need to warn Longbottom."

"It's too late." Shadow closed his eyes as regret threatened to overwhelm him. "They'd question him at the same time as they searched the town. Besides, we're too far from England to Apparate there now. Damn it! I really fucked up."

"He's not stupid. And Madam Longbottom isn't a pushover either. They'll be fine." Shadow ignored him and headed for the stairs. "Where are you going? Aren't you hungry?" Draco called after him.

"I'm taking a bath," Shadow answered shortly and disappeared around the corner.
Remus crouched down, hidden by the shadows of the woods and snow. He stared unblinkingly as Aurors burst through the front door of Severus's house. He held his breath, but a small cloud of dust engulfed the men and he could see from here that the interior was dark and ramshackle. The house was just an ordinary house now. He felt his muscles relax only to tense and spin around, wand at the ready.

A black dog transformed into his best friend and Remus sighed. "Sirius! What are you doing here?" he demanded quietly.

"I have to see Malfoy. What's going on?" Sirius looked past him toward the house.

"Aurors arrived at Neville's. They knew Shadow had gone there and they must have found out he came from the village, too. They're searching the house now."

"Shadow?"

"They're gone." Remus shook his head, amber eyes following the Aurors as they left the house and began casting diagnostic spells around the immediate yard. "Severus must have unraveled the Displacement Enchantment. They're most likely in Italy."

"Where?" Sirius demanded, all his attention focused on his friend. "I have to get to Malfoy quick, Moony."

Remus stared at his friend. Sirius rarely sounded so serious. "I don't know exactly. Just somewhere in Italy."

"Damn it," Sirius growled.

"I can try Owling them," Remus offered.

"Okay, but we have to hurry." Sirius grabbed the werewolf's arm and Apparated them to Hogsmeade. Hogwarts had some of the best postal owls. They'd use one before making their way to Italy to search for Severus themselves. They had no time to waste.

"Sirius," Remus said firmly as he chased his friend up the path to the school. "What is going on?"

"Malfoy's in danger," Sirius answered shortly. "If I don't get to him soon, he'll die."

"What?" Remus froze in the middle of the street and just stared at his friend's back.

"Hurry up! I'll tell you everything later!" Sirius yelled over his shoulder, not slowing down.

Remus ran to catch up.

Draco woke the next morning with a throbbing headache. Shadow had avoided him all last night and hadn't come down for dinner. He didn't think his love would be able to avoid Severus, however, and he looked forward to his teacher cornering him. He got dressed and did his hair before going downstairs. Shadow was nowhere to be seen, but Severus was up and drinking coffee at the dining room table. He sat and a plate of his favorite fruit and toast just the way he liked it appeared in front of him.
Severus arched an eyebrow as Draco picked up his fork and speared a strawberry.

"I doubt Shadow will come down," Draco explained. "He's been hiding in the bath and his room since lunch yesterday."

Severus scowled at that and immediately stood. Draco hid a smile behind his hand as the man strode from the room to go after his son. Checkmate, Shadow, he thought smugly and he happily speared a piece of watermelon. He loved house elves. He really did. He didn't even care about the headache anymore.

Severus knocked on Shadow's shut bedroom door. Hearing a short 'come in', he pushed it open to find his son sitting at his desk and writing in his diary. The teenager shut it as Severus came over and laid his quill neatly over the cover. He looked pale and tired, but his hands were steady and there was an air of calm around him.

"May I ask why you feel missing meals is acceptable?" Severus asked pointedly. He waved his wand and summoned a chair from the sitting room. He settled into it gracefully.

"I was thinking," Shadow said softly, turning sideways in his chair so that he could face his father. Morning sunlight streamed in through the open window and revealed dark circles under Shadow's solemn eyes. "It really sucks that I led the Aurors to Neville and our home, but on the other hand it showed us the Ministry is still actively searching for us. We can't go back to school, can we? Do you think they know I was the creature that attacked St Mungo's?"

"I doubt it," Severus answered. "I believe they merely want to question me more closely now that they know the Dark Lord has indeed returned. Possibly, they want to use me as a scapegoat for their lack of action or they want to arrest me for being a Death Eater to reassure the public that they are capable of protecting the populace. So, no, I cannot return to Hogwarts. It may be possible for you, however."

"Be serious," Shadow scoffed, flicking a curl out of his eyes impatiently. "They'd interrogate me as to your whereabouts and, even if I said you abandoned me, they would watch me like a hawk. I'd have to stop going to the DA to make sure the group didn't get discovered and I'd have to stay away from anyone who could possibly support me in Slytherin for the same reason. Not to mention the Death Eater children would love to capture me and bring me to Tom because he wants revenge on us because we prevented him from getting the prophecy. I can't go back and you know it. I'll be much more useful helping you and Sirius look for the Horcruxes."

Severus inclined his head. "I agree."

Shadow nodded and looked at his diary. He fingered the quill absently. "I don't think Draco can go back, either, for the same reasons. The Ministry knows he was involved with St Mungo's and his father will be after him for destroying the prophecy."

"This bothers you," Severus remarked shrewdly.

"He won't be able to take his OWLs because of all this. I know it's stupid to worry about that with everything else, but I hate that he's going to fall behind because of me."

"I think it is reasonable that you are concerned about his future and your own after the war," Severus argued. "You both should continue your studies as much as you can and, when this is over, I will make sure you are given the opportunity to take your tests."

Shadow laughed. "I'm not sure this will ever be over or if I'll be alive at the end of it, but thanks,
"Dad."

"All of us risk our lives," Severus said calmly. "But we will do all we can to make sure we survive."

"I know." Shadow rubbed at his eyes, his head hanging tiredly. "I wish I never went to Neville's. I wish I didn't say those things."

"What things?"

Shadow flinched and peeked up at his father. _Damn_, he thought. He remembered yesterday in the dueling room and his cheeks flushed, but his stomach turned queasily as well. He didn't want to confess to yet another person that he was seriously sick, but, god, he loved Draco so damn much. It was hard to deny by this point, especially because Draco - miracle of all miracles - loved him back.

"Forget it," he said quietly, silently begging his father to let it go.

Severus considered it. He didn't want to add more pressure, but he wanted to assure Shadow that he accepted the relationship he was forming with Draco. Decided, he shook his head. "I'm going to have to insist. What had you so distressed that you fled the house, ran to your brother, and let Seraphim rise to the surface?"

Shadow said nothing. He stared out the window and fought with himself. He didn't want to tell his father, but how long could he realistically expect Severus to stay ignorant if he and Draco were going to be in close quarters with him and Sirius? He glanced over and saw Severus waiting patiently, reminding him of all the hours they'd sat and had these kind of talks. His hands were shaking. God, he couldn't do this. Even if he should.

Seeing his rising distress, Severus leaned forward and captured Shadow's eyes with his own. "Talk to me."

"I…" Shadow shook his head helplessly. He _really_ couldn't say it. He scrambled desperately for camouflage. "I told him I was a murderer. That I should be locked away if it wouldn't mean Tom's victory. I mean, I killed those patients and Aurors at St Mungo's and Quirrell, but then I found out that was because Demon was a piece of Tom's soul. So of course he was a monster. But then I made Demon mine, turned him into Seph, and Tom's no longer a part of it. Seraphim's all me and he still killed Moody. I hate how out of control he is. I just… I hate it. Everything about it. And now Salazar says that I'm going to be like this forever. I'm going to be afraid of Seraphim coming Out and scared of what he'll do when he does for the rest of my life." He sighed and hugged his jacket closer. "At least I have this. It was really brilliant on Neville's part."

Severus leaned back, accepting the diversion for now because they needed to talk about this as well as Shadow's feelings for Draco. "Seraphim is mentally ill," he agreed, "but he has made extreme progress. Neither he nor a happy future for you are hopeless."

Shadow snorted and looked away, his eyes dark and angry.

"Forgive me, but you know less about Seraphim than either I or Draco. You'll have to take our word for it. Seraphim is hardly a monster." Severus rose and went to Shadow's bedside table. He opened the top drawer and pulled out the Wands and Potions games Seraphim and Draco had played. With them were a few happy scribbles. They demonstrated Seraphim's innocent and childlike aspects.

Shadow took them and stared, his lips white he'd pressed them closed so hard. He flipped them over after a minute and turned his face back toward Severus so he wouldn't have to look at them.
Severus smiled gently. "He does not deserve your hate. He needs to be handled carefully, yes. Hurting others is not acceptable, but he's not evil or a lost cause."

"And the people he killed? What do they deserve?"

"Punishing Seraphim won't bring them back. I think he's been punished enough as it is. We won't let him hurt others again."

"You don't know that," Shadow snapped, frustrated.

"You don't know that he will," Severus countered. "He also saved my life and healed Draco and George Weasley of possibly fatal wounds."

Shadow shook his head sharply in denial.

"It will take time. These are serious issues. I'm asking that you give yourself and us that time."

Shadow stood and paced slowly in front of his bed, obviously struggling with himself.

Severus watched him with deep admiration. He didn't know anyone who would have met the challenges and trials that Shadow had had to overcome as well as this boy had. The fact that Shadow was still such a strong, caring person was a true wonder. He wished he could make it easier, he wished he could carry some of his burdens, but all he could do was help him along the way.

"Shadow." The teen stopped and looked over at him. "What really called Seraphim Out? As distressed as you are over the alter's actions, I doubt you would have allowed yourself to be so upset as to call forth the very thing that upset you."

"I don't know what you mean," Shadow answered faintly, blood rushing from his face.

Severus stood quickly and grabbed his arm as the teen wobbled, lightheaded. "It's okay," he soothed. "Just sit down." He guided Shadow to the bed. For the first time since he began this conversation, Severus began to understand that it was going to be difficult for him as well. In order to show Shadow that it really was okay, he'd have to reveal more than he felt comfortable, but if Shadow could bear the things he had, Severus could do this.

Shadow took deep breaths, trying to regain his balance. When he felt steady, he pushed Severus away. "I'm just tired. I didn't sleep last night and I haven't eaten."

"I'm sure that contributes to your weakness, but that's not the whole truth, is it?"

Shadow stared at him in horror, eyes huge.

**Chapter end.**

**A/N: VOTE** As I'm sure you can all sense, Neville could potentially fall for Luna or I can keep them as just good friends. What do you think? Should he stay with Ginny? … Decisions, decisions…
Draco

His bedroom suddenly felt small. Shadow felt cornered. He stood near the window, wishing he could open it, but he had his arms hugged tight around his chest. He glared and began to sweat with panic. Was Severus really going to make him say it? "I don't know what you're talking about."

Severus wanted to stand. He wanted to grab his son by the shoulders and shake him. Wisely, he stayed seated, but he wore his most stern expression, dark eyes glittering. "Tell me the truth, Shadow!"

Shadow realized he wouldn't be spared. Severus would get his way, one way or another. Knowing that didn't make it any easier to speak, however. "I can't!" he screamed, tears glittered in his eyes. He felt humiliated and wished Severus would just leave him alone. "God!"

"Shadow!" Severus said sharply. "Stop this at once. Tell me!"

"I told him... I told Neville I kissed Draco!" Shadow screamed. He reached back and grabbed a pillow and flung it at Severus. "Are you happy? Get out! Just leave me the fuck alone, you sadistic asshole! GET OUT!"

"Thank you." Severus came forward and pulled Shadow into a loose embrace. Shadow took deep, rapid breaths, trying vainly not to cry. "And I'm so proud of you. I suspected things would move in this direction since the end of summer."

"What?" Shadow pulled away and glared up at the man. "You knew and didn't say anything? What the fuck was this interrogation all about then?"

"I suspected," Severus emphasized. "I admit I'm pleased with how sincere Draco's feelings for you have become. I was afraid you would not be able to accept what he had to offer, but you are stronger than even I suspected."

"What are you going on about?" Shadow demanded, fists clenched, thinking Severus had lost his mind. "You're proud of me?"

Severus was deeply uncomfortable, but he knew how important it was to make this clear. His lank hair fell around his face as he looked down at his traumatized son. "There's nothing wrong with Draco falling in love with you, Shadow. It's hardly surprising, though you may not see it now. You are an incredible person. You deserve love, and I can see that he truly does loves you."

"Stop," Shadow begged. "Just stop, please."

"And I know you love him. Only you could have helped him grow into the man he is becoming." Severus tilted his head and hid behind a curtain of greasy hair. "I'm glad you found your Amalia," he said softly. "Trust me when I say, no matter how hard it is, don't let him go."

Shadow could hardly feel the ground beneath his feet. He felt like he was in some twisted parallel universe. Severus was standing there, spewing sappy love stuff and telling him to hold on to Draco? He was comparing Draco to Amalia? God, he didn't know what to think or do with any of this! It was insane!

Almost hyperventilating, he jumped when there was a knock at his door. It opened before he could
say anything and his eyes widened as Draco stepped into the room. God, he couldn't deal with this. Shadow opened his mouth to yell at him, to tell him to get out, but then Severus said, "Draco?", and his voice was soft with concern.

Blinking, Shadow really looked at his friend and felt like he was literally doused with cold water. Draco was pale, too pale, and he had his hand up clutching his nose. Looking carefully, Shadow could just see a faint hint of red. Draco's grey eyes were wide and he looked terrified.

Shadow and Severus rushed forward at the same time. Shadow pulled Draco's hand away from his face to reveal a severe nosebleed. He pulled the blond toward the bed, asking him what hurt. Draco said nothing, just stared at his bloody hand, shocked. Severus was casting diagnostic spells and Shadow didn't like how his frown deepened with each result.

"I… I guess… that's it," Draco gasped.

"What are you talking about?" Shadow demanded as the Slytherin sat on the bed and lay down. "What's going on?"

"I thought he'd want to kill me personally, you know? Maybe teach me a lesson. Show me the error of my ways." Draco laughed and it wasn't a good sound.

"What is he talking about?" Shadow demanded of his father.

"It seems that Lucius has cursed Draco," Severus answered reluctantly.

"Well, uncurse him!"

Draco moaned and clutched his head, obviously in pain. Shadow held his hand, wincing at how tight Draco squeezed. Then the moment passed and Draco lay panting on the bed, covered in sweat and face smeared with blood. Shadow tried to wipe it away with shaking fingers, but he was only making it worse.

"There's no cure," Draco explained hoarsely. "He has sentenced me as the Head of my family and as my father."

"Sentenced?" Shadow asked, looking at Severus.

Severus couldn't answer. Not after their conversation. Not now. He stared helplessly back at his son. Draco grabbed Shadow's sleeve. "I'm so sorry. I really didn't think he'd go this far. Not so soon."

"What are you talking about?" Shadow demanded, holding the blond's wrist tightly.

"I'm dying, Shadow," Draco said tightly. His grey eyes swam with tears for a moment, but then he hardened his features, putting on a brave mask. "I wish I could see you take down these bastards. Guess I'll have to watch from a distance, huh?"

Shadow was speechless. Dying? Draco? No way. Draco was too stubborn, too… Draco. But as he looked down into his friend's face, he could see how weak he was becoming. He could see how much he was afraid and how much he hurt. "No," he said faintly. "No, Draco… Serpentine… You fight this. We'll find a way to stop it. You just have to hold on. Right, Severus?"

"I'm sorry," Severus whispered. "This is old magic, there's no…"

"Don't say it! Don't you dare say it!" Shadow was panting, he was so angry.
Draco convulsed as a wretched yell of pain was pulled from his tight throat. Distantly he could hear Shadow demanding Severus do something, but he knew the Potions Master could do nothing. There was nothing anyone could do. Suddenly, he gasped as the pain was smothered and pushed out of him. He opened his eyes and saw red. Blinking cleared them somewhat and he saw Shadow leaning rigidly over him, pinning his shoulders down with his hands. His head hung inches from Draco’s forehead. Warm, it was so warm.

Shadow felt the magic boil up from his gut and pour down his arms. It hurt! It felt like his arms were on fire; it amazed him that they didn’t combust at any moment. He felt Draco’s gaze on him and opened his eyes. Tears of blood rolled down Draco’s face and Shadow bit his lip hard as Draco smiled up at him, lips trembling.

"Together, remember?" Shadow whispered.

"Together," Draco answered on a sigh and closed his eyes, falling into an exhausted sleep.

Shadow released him and held his arms awkwardly to the side. It was excruciating and he tried to move them as little as possible. "I've only bought him time," he said through gritted teeth. "We have to do something."

"There's nothing…"

"Don't tell me that!" Shadow snapped, eyes blazing. "We will save him."

Severus nodded and left the room. He knew Draco had no chance, but he would try for his son. It was the least he could do.

Shadow fell to his knees and cried softly, curled over his arms protectively. "You scare the shit out of me, confuse me like hell; I don't know what to do with you, but…” he gasped, closing his eyes tight. "But you can't die, Draco. You just can't. You're too young. You have so much to give. And it's my fault Lucius is doing this to you. You can't do this to me. You can't lay that on my shoulders. If you really love me, prove it, Draco! Prove it and don't fucking die!" His arms only aching now, he wiped at his face and stood. Draco lay still, pale, and bloody. He hadn't woken even with Shadow yelling at him. "Omi!"

"Yes, young master?" the elf asked as it appeared in the doorway.

"Bring me clean towels and warm water."

"Yes, sir." The elf disappeared and a minute later the items he requested appeared on the bedside table.

Shadow pulled his chair over to the bedside. Carefully, gently, he dipped a towel in the warm water and cleaned Draco’s face of the blood. A sharp memory hit him, stealing his breath away…

Shadow sat at his piano after his detention with Umbridge and pounded on the keys relentlessly. Rocking back and forth as he beat out a furious melody, teeth bared in a snarl, he remembered every criminal, every horrific punishment the Ministry had dealt. He played until his fingers hurt and his arms ached. He played until he felt the anger drain away and he felt he wasn’t in danger of breaking something or screaming. The notes softened as the adrenaline rush left him. Crying, he stared at the keys through blurry eyes.

Suddenly, Draco was there, pulling him into a tight hug. Shadow gasped for air and covered his face as he leaned into the blond’s warmth. Draco held him tightly for several long minutes before Draco spoke. "What happened? What did she do to you?"
Shadow didn't say anything. He was exhausted from playing, exhausted from keeping himself under control all night. It wasn't just the fear of something happening to Severus or hate for the Ministry and Umbridge that had him breaking down, it was also the graphic and horrific images he had been forced to look through during detention. They reminded him too much of what Demon had done to the Dursleys, reminded him of the battle and deaths he had witnessed in the caves.

"Hey," Draco said softly. He gently brushed curls away from Shadow's eyes and wiped at the tear tracks left on his pale cheeks. Shadow unconsciously leaned into his hand. "It's okay."

Shadow smiled, aware of how ridiculous he was being. He stood and went to his dresser, pulling out a pair of pajamas.

"I'll be right back," Draco said and left the room.

Shadow changed and returned his piano to a charm. Slipping the necklace over his head, he sat on his bed and stared out at the water landscape out the window, trying to erase Umbridge's stupid essay from his mind. Draco came in a moment later and he crouched in front of him, handing him a wet cloth.

"Thanks," Shadow said hoarsely. It was cool against his skin and erased the sticky residue of sweat and tears. He sighed as it gave him some sense of relief, made him feel less like he'd break. He looked down at his friend who was still crouched and looking up at him. Draco was frowning in worry, watching him carefully.

"You okay?" Draco asked. He took back the cloth and set it on the nightstand.

"I'm fine," Shadow promised. He lay down and closed his eyes. He knew Draco wanted answers, but he just wanted this day to be over. After a moment, he heard Draco sigh and move across the room toward the door. For some reason, that made him feel suddenly panicky. "Serpentine." He heard Draco stop and opened his eyes to see Draco looking over his shoulder at him worriedly.

"Stay?"

"Sure," Draco answered softly and crawled into bed next to him without asking a single question.

… Catching his breath, Shadow continued to wash the blood from Draco's face. He focused on the task, refusing to think of anything else. Slowly his fingers steadied and stopped shaking so much and the band constricting his chest loosened and disappeared. Shadow took in the blond's clean, damp face and smiled.

"We'll fix this," he promised and stood. He left the room and called out, "Omi!"

"Yes, sir?" the elf asked, wringing his hands in distress.

"Watch over Draco. If he wakes up or if his condition gets worse, come get me immediately," Shadow ordered, staring into the large blue eyes.

"Yes, sir," Omi nodded enthusiastically.

Shadow nodded and hurried downstairs toward the library. He wasn't going to let Draco die.

Draco had snuck past his barriers when he was still fractured, when all Draco had known was Silas through letters and from working together over a basilisk corpse. It had been during one of those sessions that Draco had insisted they move their association toward something more personal and not just business.
“Shadow,” Draco had said softly, looking at him so earnestly with those dark grey eyes of his. He had looked so much younger then, even though it had only been a year ago. “I don't care who you really are. And I know why you hate the Headmaster so much. I understand and I want to help you.”

“What do you know, Draco?” he had questioned. Shadow had known there was a risk in getting so involved with the Slytherin, and he had been prepared to face the consequences and protect himself - no matter that he would have rather not hurt the Slytherin.

“I don't know anything for sure, but I think I know who you are.” Draco hadn't look away from his eyes, hadn't flinched, stubborn even then. "The only way you could have helped out the other Champions was if you were on the ground and not needed inside the Champion's tent, which Harry most definitely was… You're not Harry Potter. You're his identical twin brother. Look, Shadow. I won't tell anyone. And I'll even help out your brother. I'd like us to be more than allies. You can trust me."

“You mean… like friends?”

"Maybe.” Draco had smiled slyly. "I think we can benefit each other, don't you?"

"Maybe,” he had returned in a whisper. That was the first time he, as Silas, had ever considered the possibility that he could have a life, that he could have his own friends, that he could live again. And he had been very relieved he wouldn't have to hurt Draco or have to try to Obliviate him.

"It'll be all right, Shadow, or whatever your real name is. I have good news for you. About a certain reporter at the Daily Prophet."

Even then Draco had noticed when he was uncomfortable and had smoothly changed the subject. Shadow had laughed and approached the blond while Draco smirked and preened. They'd stood next to each other for a good half hour, just looking at pictures, laughing and relishing in Skeeter's fury and humiliation.

But as they parted, Draco had reminded him of their previous conversation and said, "Hey, I'll help you look after Harry, too. He's not half as bad as Weasley or Granger, at least. I suppose for a Gryffindor he's tolerable." Then he had turned and walked away without another word, not willing to push the issue.

"Draco!” He had called, unable to let him go. "Silas, but Shadow works, too."

"See you Wednesday, Silas.” Draco had grinned.

Draco was the second person he had ever told the name Silas to. It just proved how much trust he had placed in Draco. Even as a Gryffindor, Shadow had wanted Draco’s attention. He remembered that not long after that he had asked Draco, as Harry, for dance lessons. At first, it hadn't gone well.

"I hope you don't plan to dance like that,” Draco had snapped as he came forward and shoved at his shoulders until he was standing correctly. "Relax. You can't move if you're standing as stiff as a board. I'm not going to hex you or anything. And stop scowling, Potter!” Sighing, Draco had taken up a position in front and began to move. "Copy me."

He’d tried, but after a few minutes he had decided that this was more difficult then he’d thought it would be. "Can we have music? That might help."

Music had filled the room and they continued to dance. After completing the steps twice, Draco had stopped and ordered him to keep going while he watched. It had been strange dancing with those grey eyes watching his every move. He would stumble, and Draco would sneer and insult him until
he hadn't been able to take it anymore.

"You're not helping, you know."

"Potter, I don't think a dance spell would help you! There's an hour before lunch. Do you think you could try and make progress before then?"

"There're too many steps, and I can't remember to dip and spin my partner when I don't really have one!"

"Don't even ask, Potter!" Draco had glared suspiciously. "I don't even know the girl's steps!"

Knowing where their relationship now was, Shadow laughed. He suspected if he asked Draco to dance with him now, the Slytherin wouldn't protest at all. But he hadn't known then, and instead of laughing, it had only made him more frustrated.

"I wasn't asking you to dance with me, Draco! Oh, this is ridiculous! I should have known it was impossible to have a truce with you! Silas must be out of his mind to be your friend!" - God, he had really been a mess back then.

"Po-Harry, wait." That was the first time Draco had called him Harry. "Let's just practice a few minutes more. Follow me a couple more times."

And as Draco had danced, even as Gryffindor Harry, he had noticed his grace. Draco had always been beautiful.

And that made him think about how Draco had helped him even when he hadn't been Silas, even when the Slytherin thought Silas and Harry Potter were two different people. It was right after that awful article had come out about Hagrid being unfit because he was half-monster.

As the pure Gryffindor he'd been at the time, he had attacked Draco directly, pulling him close by his collar in front of everyone and snarled in his face, "How could you?"

Draco had smirked, but when he spoke his voice had been soft so only Harry could hear. "If I didn't, then Nott would have. At least I guided the insults to ones that are more easily countered."

Shadow had blinked, surprised. He had known that "Silas" wouldn't be distraught over Hagrid losing his job or even been tormented by the press. It wouldn't have bothered him either way. So Draco hadn't tried to help for Silas's sake; he'd done it solely for Harry.

But that didn't mean that when Draco had found out that Harry and Silas were one person, he wasn't very pissed.

Draco had come to confront him in the Hospital Wing and had woken him from a troubled sleep. Shadow had been sitting up and pointing his wand at the blond before he was even fully awake. The hurt look that fleetingly crossed Draco's face had hit him hard. "Draco! What are you doing here? What time is it?"

"It's one in the morning, and I believe you owe me some answers, Potter."

The Slytherin had moved back into the shadows so that Shadow couldn't read his face. He'd been relieved. He hadn't wanted to see his friend's disgust while he finally told him the truth.

"This is ridiculous," Draco had spat, just as he'd expected. "I want the truth, Potter, not more lies!"
He hadn't expected not to be believed and had been furious at the Slytherin. After putting himself through the hell of confessing, Draco was damn well going to understand. "Down in that lake, I was dying. I was going to die, Draco, and I couldn't survive as just Harry. I needed Silas' ability to plan and trick the opponent, to escape. But I still needed Harry's combat skills. I needed both at once, and I finally let go. I finally let my two selves come together because it was that or I was going to die."

Draco hadn't said anything for a long moment, and Shadow had begun to sweat when the blond suddenly stepped into the moonlight and met his eyes with a solemn expression. "So Silas is really gone? Gone for good?"

"I'm still Silas. I'm just also Gryffindor Harry. I'm both." He had known rejection was coming and he had hunched his shoulders and snarled defensively, "Is that too hard to understand? Forgive me for not telling you the truth sooner since you pride it so very much. Forgive me, Draco, for this being so fucked up, but as strange as it is for you, imagine being me!"

And again Draco had surprised him, using humor to distract him. "Calm down. You're going to explode if you keep it up."

"If you could see my glare clearly right now, you'd be very afraid."

"I'm sure," Draco had answered breezily.

Shadow had cracked and begun to laugh quietly. Draco had smiled back and sat silently at the end of the bed. "So, does this bother you? That you're friends with a Gryffindor? You can't hide behind Silas anymore."

"Please," Draco had scoffed, playing along. "If Silas is any part of you, then you are no Gryffindor."

"True. I'll give you that. The Hat originally wanted me in Slytherin."

And that was when their friendship had begun in earnest. That was when Shadow had begun to ask for favors. Favors that would reshape Draco's world and put him in danger.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he had said over the basilisk corpse. "It's a rather large one and... gruesome."

Draco's eyes had widened, but he hadn't flinched. "What is it?"

"I need your help constructing a poison and trigger spell."

"A basilisk poison?" Draco had asked shrewdly. "Who do you want to kill?"

"Dumbledore."

The blond had stared at him, face expressionless. Shadow had felt his muscles getting tenser and tenser under that pinning grey gaze. "Dumbledore... Tell me why first."

"I'm afraid there's too much of a chance that he'll hurt me again. He is capable of imprisoning my mind or even breaking it again. I can't risk that."

Draco had studied his face for a minute and then answered firmly, "I'll do it."

Shadow hadn't known then that Draco would activate that poison in just a couple months and kill the conniving old man. He'd always intended to be the one to do it; he never wanted Draco to have to do such a thing, no matter how willing he said he was. Draco had understood the seriousness of what
they were doing better than Shadow had. When it was finished, only Draco had been wise enough to question the plan.

"Are you still certain you want to do this?"

"You can back out now if you want. I can cast an Obliviate."

"No," Draco had huffed, hooking a stray lock of hair back behind his ear. "I said I'd help you. I'm just making sure you're all right with this. We're planning on murdering Albus Dumbledore."

God, Shadow hadn't known then what he would be putting Draco through by making this poison, but if they hadn't, Severus would be dead and would never have fetched him from the graveyard. Shadow would have bled to death there despite Boy's ability to self-heal. He was glad they'd thought ahead to protect themselves.

"Why are you doing this?" Shadow had turned Draco's question back at him, trying to get the attention off himself. "You're willing to kill someone over the mere fact that they hurt me?"

"Tortured you is more like it." Draco had stared straight at Shadow and it had felt like the blond was looking right into him and seeing everything. "Yes. I guess I would kill for you."

That answer had literally taken Shadow's breath away. He hadn't understood then just how deep Draco's loyalty ran. Shadow didn't deserve it then or now, but it made him feel incredibly warm nonetheless. And most of the time it was like that - Shadow leaning on Draco - but sometimes Draco revealed his own vulnerabilities and leaned on Shadow.

He remembered questioning the Slytherin about why he was helping him and why he was turning against his father and the Dark Lord. They had been in an empty classroom and sitting at separate desks. Shadow had seen the increasing strain on Draco's face and impulsively canceled the lights, plunging them into darkness. Draco had sighed in relief; like Shadow, he took comfort from the dark.

That was when Draco had described his childhood, growing up with inhumanly high expectations from a father he'd idolized and a mother who wouldn't protect him for fear of punishment herself. It'd been the summer after first year that Lucius had taken a twelve-year-old Draco down to the dungeons for ten days straight and forced Draco to watch as he tortured a Muggle everyday. All because Lucius was trying to prove how inferior Muggles were and that was why Draco should have been doing better than Hermione at school, and why it was such a disgrace that he wasn't.

Shadow had listened to this and thought for the first time that maybe he was lucky to have lost his parents. Parents had an incredible power to hurt you, just as Draco's father had seriously hurt him, twisted him. When Draco continued, his voice had been thick with tears and Shadow had silently promised himself to do whatever he could to help the Slytherin.

Draco had then described how during the summer after second year Lucius had put him under Imperio. It wasn't really the words that Draco had used to describe it that struck Shadow, it was the desolation in his voice. Shadow had literally shivered, cold with dread. Draco had lived like that for almost three straight months, from the day he got back from school to the day he left for Hogwarts again. Everything had felt numb for the blond after that. He'd felt disconnected from everyone, like he'd been a ghost walking among the living with no way to really engage the world.

Draco's voice had been hoarse by this point, terrible to hear. Shadow had wanted to go to him, but hadn't the courage then. Then Draco had described coming home to a weeping and apologetic mother after third year. That was when they had started writing. Shadow was shocked to hear just how important those letters had been to the Slytherin. More than ever, Shadow had been grateful that
he had written Draco back that day.

_Not knowing the impact his words were making, Draco had said lightly, "I'm lucky really. If it weren't for Lucius being so busy with work and being gone so much last summer, I probably wouldn't have had the space to realize what I did. He would have forced me into his footsteps, but my mother was there and he wasn't. And so were you. Your letters really changed a lot for me. Hearing about how you were able to defeat the Dark Lord so many times really gave me courage to turn away from becoming a Death Eater." Draco had snorted with dry humor. "Two Slytherins with courage. What would the world make of us?"

"The world would do best to get out of our way," Shadow had answered darkly. But Draco hadn't understood just how protective and serious he had meant the statement for he had laughed.

"Damn straight."

"We're in this together now," Shadow had told him and he still remembered the bright smile that had put on Draco's face. That was all it had taken to make Draco blindingly happy, to know he wasn't alone and that Shadow would stand by him in return.

Months later, in the middle of the summer after their fourth year, Shadow had again sat and listened to Draco recount a horrifying summer. They had sat at his piano and Draco next to him, telling him how Lucius had gone crazy after the graveyard, sometimes even physically attacking him and his mother. Worse, Lucius had forced Draco to witness Shadow's torture first hand with him in a Pensieve.

Shadow's body had still been healing, he'd still been weak from that torture, but he didn't remember a thing even though he'd felt the oily terror deep in his bones. Seeing Draco's pale face, his wide horrified eyes as he remembered, Shadow had understood that Draco was the only one who might truly understand. Not even Severus had witness his torture, his father had arrived when it was already done.

So Shadow had confided in Draco that nameless anxiety he felt and couldn't really get a hold of _because_ he didn't remember why he was so afraid. He'd told Draco that he wouldn't be made a victim again, that he would make sure the Death Eaters, including Draco's father, wouldn't be able to hurt him like that ever again. And of course Draco had turned it into a joke to ease the tension.

"You're not happy until you're plotting against someone, are you?"

"Of course," Shadow had answered, winking. "I wouldn't be Slytherin otherwise."

Draco had always seemed to accept him, no matter his flaws. When his mind was fractured into several different personalities, he'd accepted it calmly. After the Adoption Ritual and his whole appearance had shifted, Draco had said, "You are beautiful. You're an asset to the Wizarding world."

When he'd had a seizure and come back after torturing the Dursleys, Draco had stood beside him as Shadow had stared in a mirror. Draco hadn't flinched from his badly scarred body and tried to convince him that he wasn't a monster. Yes, the Slytherin had always supported him - quietly, loudly, whatever was needed - but there was also play between them.

He'd attacked Draco as a cat and the blond had chased him all over the house until he'd cornered him in the sitting room. Shadow had pounced and torn his shirt. Furious, Draco had drenched him with cold water and taken one look at him before bursting into laughter. Shadow had rumbled a growl as he shook himself, flinging water everywhere.
"Are you done playing like children?" Severus had drawled from the doorway.

"Yes, sir," Draco had answered with a smug smile. "I think we are."

He'd scowled at the blond, human again and still wet. "Was that necessary?"

"What do you think?" he'd sneered, gesturing to his shredded shirt.

There were chess games and duels at home, at the DA, in the Chamber of Secrets. There were clumsy piano lessons and glorious broom races and flying. There was laughter over homework and camaraderie while planning the DA. And there'd been that kiss in the Department of Mysteries and that episode in the dueling room just yesterday, the heat and taste of Draco now seared in his mind forever.

But as much as they'd helped each other and had fun together, it wasn't evenly balanced. Shadow had gotten more out of the relationship by far. Draco had lost his place with his family. He'd defended Shadow twice from Lucius. Once in the caves when Shadow had abandoned him to be whipped; Draco had almost died as they tried to fight their way free. The second time, Draco had taken a face full of puke-yellow spell-light and fell.

Shadow's shields had already been sputtering and about to crumble; he hadn't been able to go to the blond, but then Severus had yelled something dark and sinister and for a second Shadow had felt the pressure on his shields ease as the Death Eaters had done all they could to block the Potion Master's attack.

"Don't be dead," he'd ordered in a croak and crawled over to his friend.

Draco had lain cold and clammy. His breath had literally frosted the air. Shadow had shakily cast warming charms, any that he knew, but it hadn't been enough.

Draco would have died if it weren't for the Order showing up then to rescue them. And Draco had almost died again when he defied Lucius a second time in the Department of Mysteries. It was that total fear of losing Draco's subtle and irreplaceable support in his life that had triggered their first kiss.

Draco had abandoned his beloved mother for him. He had killed Dumbledore for him. He'd stood by him against Umbridge and guarded his back from Slytherins and Gryffindors alike, putting himself at odds with his beloved House. He'd faced his fear of the Dark Lord for him. What had Shadow ever given him back of equal value? A few laughs and a listening ear?

Draco had helped stitch his soul back together, had helped hold those stitches closed so he didn't unravel again. He'd promised to kill Lockhart so that Shadow would win a bit more peace from his nightmares. He'd spent hours coddling Boy, playing child games and just healing some of that severe psychological hurt. He'd respected Demon, protected him even as the alter murdered innocent people. What had Shadow given him except isolation, uncertainty, fear, and potential death?

"I owe you too much. You have to stick around and collect. What good Slytherin would pass up a deal like that, huh?"

And now Draco was lying in front of him. Beautiful, laughing, fierce Draco - the dancer, the dueler, the Seeker, with an obsession with appearance and a fondness for delicacies and fine things - All that was gone, ravished by this deadly curse. His soft blond hair was matted and greasy with sweat, which smelled sweet with sickness. His fair skin, dry and papery, was tinged blue around the lips.

"This isn't how it's going to go, you hear me?"
The bruises around Draco’s eyes had deepened even as he lay senseless from powerful pain-relieving potions. Despite them, deep wrinkles still creased Draco’s forehead, attesting to the acute pain he felt in every joint. Bloody towels lay abandoned beside Shadow’s chair from the many nosebleeds he’d tried to staunch, since magic didn’t seem to work on them any longer.

"That day, after Firenze, I couldn't handle it. Do you remember?"

Shadow had been at Draco’s bedside for hours now and had to heal him more and more often, but even his creation magic was repairing less and less damage. Severus was still searching for something, anything, to save Draco, but he had found nothing and continued to look unhopeful. Shadow leaned over his friend, breathing in the sour breath Draco exhaled. He sighed and placed his forehead against the blond’s, letting his magic seep through the skin-to-skin contact. It didn't even hurt anymore, but that might have been because Shadow was utterly numb from exhaustion.

"You looked at me then with this despairing look, and I yelled at you because I couldn't handle it."

Draco’s laboring breaths eased a bit, each inhale seeming less of an effort as the magic took effect, but Draco’s nose began to bleed again. Shadow leaned back and gently wiped the blood away. There was no escaping it. Draco was dying and not even Seraphim could save him, even if Shadow were to call the alter Out. Draco was dying and it was because of Shadow. It wasn't fair because Draco had given him so much, had tried so damn hard to hold everything together. He was a hero, as stupid as that sounded, he really was.

"Draco…” Shadow leaned forward and put his mouth next to the blond’s ear. "I know you can hear me… It's not in you to give up. You can't give in now. I'm not going to let you die. You hear me? I'm not letting you go. Especially not to Lucius."

Shadow leaned back in his chair and sighed, remembering this past summer when he and Draco had shared a room at Grimmauld Place. His nightmares had been particularly bad then and he’d wake Draco several times a week. The Slytherin had never gotten annoyed. Instead, Draco had talked him out of it, careful not to touch him and make it worse - just talked to him until Shadow’s heart had stopped racing and the terror had slowly crept back into the corners of his mind where it hid.

"It's my turn to help you through your nightmare. I'm afraid I'm not doing so well."

Shadow had past the edge of exhaustion and hysteria ages ago. Everything was fuzzy at the edges of his vision and he felt like his head was just floating over an empty space, his body numb except for his fingertips which stroked Draco's hair. But he felt an unbreakable determination holding him up, keeping the center of his vision clear. It was his turn to be strong for Draco, and he wasn’t about to fail.

"Draco…” he whispered, not even aware he was doing so. "Draco…”

Standing, Shadow heard several loud pops. He assumed it was his back, but he couldn't feel it. He went around the bed and crawled in on the other side. Barefoot but dressed, Shadow slipped under the covers, hoping to offer Draco some warmth. He curled his arm loosely around the blond's already thinning waist and rested his head on the same pillow so that his nose was mere inches from Draco's pale cheek.

"You want me to say it, don't you." He tightened his arm and pulled Draco toward him. The movement made his face tip toward him slightly. Shadow pushed their foreheads together again. "…I admit it, okay? … I love you… God, it scares the shit out of me, but it's true. Are you happy now? Is that what you were waiting for?"
There was no response from Draco. He lay lifeless, deteriorating and drugged senseless. Shadow closed his eyes against the hot tears that filled his vision. He forced what little magic he had left to flow away from him. It felt like bleeding out, it tasted like fear, and it wasn't enough. It would never be enough because Lucius fucking Malfoy willed his son to die. This was the man who had created Draco, the man who would burn in Hell for destroying Draco. Shadow pushed his face into the pillow, clung to his love, and sobbed.

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Lucius knelt before a three-foot square of old parchment with a runic circle that was painted in Lucius's blood. In each corner, a mortar and pestle stood with magical ingredients that smoked lightly like incense. In the center, written in Draco's blood from a vial Lucius kept in the family safe, had been a name: *Draco Lucius Malfoy*. Lucius watched avidly, his eyes glittering and his mouth turned down in a frown, as the letters crisped and flaked off, blowing away in the breeze. With the last letter, Draco's life would be ended.

The spell he had used was for the worst traitors and should have inflicted great physical suffering, taking an hour for each letter. Therefore Draco should have died a mere seventeen hours after the Dark spell was activated. It hadn't worked that way.

The spell worked backwards, erasing the name Malfoy first and severing all rights of inheritance. The Y had taken four hours to disintegrate, so had the O. The F and L had taken three each, the A two hours. He'd started the blood curse a few hours after dawn and it was now midnight. The S in Lucius only half burnt away. At first, he'd been enraged, but now he reconsidered. He could imagine Severus trying to save the wretched boy. He could imagine the man's desperation, his fury as he merely slowed the curse and prolonged Draco's suffering. Yes. This was perfect. His enemy was helpless despite all his skill. Lucius laughed.

Narcissa looked down at the name of her son and wondered what was taking so long for Sirius to act. If he didn't do so soon, if the spell began to erase Draco's first name, it would be too late and her only child would die in acute pain and without her beside him. Cold, she had never been so cold, despite the heavy dress she wore and shawl around her shoulders.

Lucius looked up at his wife and saw something of her agony in her face. "Don't worry, Cissa. With potions, I'm sure you will be able to conceive again. I'll give you a better child. A child that will be faithful and powerful, unlike that wretched boy."

She said nothing, silently watching the name that embodied her son disappear.

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Severus walked quietly into his son's bedroom. His usually numb heart clenched as he listened to Shadow's helpless sobs from where he was curled around Draco protectively. Blood trickled from Draco's nose and ears, was beginning to pool in his eyes. His chest labored to rise, his whole torso straining with the effort. His skin held a faint hint of yellow now. He was nearing the point of no return and Shadow hardly looked better.

His son hadn't slept or eaten in almost forty-eight hours now. Severus placed a pain-relieving potion on the bedside table. The previous dose had expired half an hour ago, but Draco hadn't yet regained consciousness despite the pain he had to be experiencing. That wasn't a good sign.

Shadow tensed, hearing his father's approach and tried to steady his breathing and stop the tears. He refused to look up at the man, refused to see the certainty of Draco's death in Severus's face. He wouldn't give up! It wasn't over!
Omi appeared with a sharp crack. "Master! There be wizards at the door!"

"Who?" Severus demanded, already moving. Shadow lifted his head curiously.

"Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin, Master! They say it is very urgent," the elf answered, chasing after his Master.

Severus was already at the front door. With seven quick flicks, the wards parted and the door slammed open. Sirius didn't waste any time. His hair flared around his head as he ran upstairs two at a time, making him like the madman that most of the world thought he was. Remus ran after him, and Severus followed demanding an explanation. They burst into the sickroom to see Shadow standing and coming toward the door, obviously on guard. He gasped as Sirius pushed past him and ran to Draco's side without a word.

"He received a letter from Narcissa Malfoy yesterday and a vial of blood," Remus explained breathlessly. "With it, he hopes he can stop Lucius. We tried to find you, but since we didn't know exactly where in Italy the house was located, it took a bit of time."

"What's he doing?" Shadow demanded, wild-eyed and verging on hysterical. Severus held his shoulder tightly to prevent the teen from trying to get past the golden circle of light that had shimmered into existence around the bed.

Sirius cut his palm and drew a rune on Draco's forehead in blood. He perfectly mirrored that rune on his own forehead before reaching for the goblet he had set on the bedside table. He began chanting and the potion began to smoke. Shadow had never seen Sirius so powerful, so intent.

Sirius Black raised the goblet up high, yelling words in Latin and Greek. The protective spell-circle sparked and sizzled, pulsing with power. Lowering the goblet, still chanting, Sirius reached into his robe pocket and poured in a thin vial of blood. They could see whatever was inside almost bubbling over. Black acrid smoke rose from it. Sirius climbed on the bed, his blue eyes almost glowing and sharply focused on the blond. He used one arm to lift Draco and prop him up. The Slytherin's head lolled to the side, completely limp.

Sirius grabbed the back of his hair to tip his head back and hold it steady. Draco groaned, his hands spasmed as he began to regain consciousness. Sirius shook him roughly, rousing him further. Shadow whimpered, protesting the harsh treatment as they clearly saw a chuck of blond hair come away in Sirius's hand. Sirius just grabbed another fistful to steady his grip.

"DRACO…" Shadow screamed.

"He must," Severus whispered harshly, wrapping his arms around his son's thin chest and holding him still.

Sirius poured the thick, boiling potion into the blond's mouth slowly. "Drink it!" he commanded, unrelenting. "Drink it, Draco! Now!"

Gasping, gagging, Draco struggled weakly, his eyes unfocused and delirious.

"DRINK IT!" Sirius bellowed right in his face as he continued to pour.

"Stop it!" Shadow yelled, pulling against his father desperately. "Why doesn't he just spell it into him?"

"Draco must drink it willingly and unaided or it won't work," Remus answered, voice intense, his eyes pinned to the two on the bed.
Slowly, Draco began to swallow. It was self-defense. He couldn't breathe with the burning goop in his mouth. Blood flowed freely from his nose and eyes, from his ears. He arched and clawed at the blanket, desperate and afraid. Sirius continued to pour until the goblet was empty. He waited until the blond finished swallowing before laying him flat again. The golden shield pulsed once more before fading away. The power in the room slowly dissipated and Sirius stood, panting, beside the bed.

"It's done," he said hoarsely and fell into the chair, obviously exhausted.

"What did you do?" Shadow demanded, yanking free of his father and grabbing Sirius by his shoulders.

Sirius smiled roguishly up at him. "Sorry, godson, but I can't make you the Black Heir like I planned."

"What does that mean?" Shadow hissed, eyes narrowed dangerously.

"It means that the mutt just made Draco the Black Family Heir," Severus answered darkly. "If it's not too late, that will save Draco from the curse and protect him from further blood magic from Lucius."

"He's technically Draco Black now," Sirius agreed.

Shadow's face transformed with joy.

"If he was in time," Severus warned gently.

"He was," Shadow insisted and turned back to his best friend. "Draco's not going to die. I already told you that."

Draco didn't look any different. He was wheezing and gasping, blood still pouring down his face. His eyes were unfocused. He wasn't aware of anything going on around him. Pain still etched itself on his face. Shadow held his hand gently and looked to Remus and Sirius for reassurance, a painful vulnerability shining in his eyes.

"It will take time for the spell to take effect," Remus said gently and brushed a curl away from Shadow's damp forehead.

"Did Sirius just adopt him?" Shadow asked, trying to distract himself.

"Yes. And made him my Heir. Basically I just tuned his magic to the Black Family instead of the Malfoys. It wouldn't have been possible, but his mother was born a Black. Narcissa is my first cousin and she sent me a vial of her blood, basically granting her permission and proving Draco's claim is based on blood," Sirius explained. "By activating the blood spell to denounce and remove Draco from the Malfoy line at the same time, it allowed his mother's family to claim him instead. Ideally, I should have claimed him once Lucius erased his last name, but it looks like he's lost his middle as well."

Shadow was hardly listening. His heart hammered in his chest and he stared at Draco avidly, looking for the smallest sign that the blood curse had been stopped, and slowly Draco's breathing evened out, the creases in his face lessened as his eyes fluttered closed with exhaustion. The blood flowing from his nose, eyes, and ears came to a stop. Shaking, Shadow dipped a towel in water and gently washed his face clean once more.

"It succeeded," Severus said, deeply relieved. He squeezed his son's shoulders tightly, relief making him lighthearted. "Draco will recover."
"Hot damn," Sirius laughed and collapsed further into the chair. Remus grinned from ear to ear and looked at Shadow.

Shadow smiled softly, tears slowly sliding down his cheeks. "Thank you," he told his godfather thickly. "Thank you, Sirius."

Sirius blushed and smiled up at him. "No problem, kid."

Shadow sighed, looked back at Draco, and fainted into his father's waiting embrace.

Remus instantly moved forward and began casting diagnostic spells. Severus let him as he lifted Shadow into his arms and walked him around the bed. Gently, he laid Shadow down next to Draco and tucked him in.

"He's dehydrated," Remus reported with a frown. "Not to mention exhausted and starving."

"He was inconsolable," Severus explained shortly. "We will correct the situation now that Draco is improving."

Remus nodded, but he was still unhappy with Shadow's condition.

Severus faced Sirius from across the bed, his dark eyes hooded. "My thanks as well, Black."

Sirius flashed a shit eating grin. "Is that all? I just saved your bacon, I did."

"You are a hero," Severus sneered. "Is that what you want to hear?"

"Don't mention it, Snape. All in a day's work." Sirius laughed and stretched. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to get myself some grub, take a bath, and climb into bed myself." He strutted out of the room and the other two men knew they would be hearing about this for days.

"I apologize for not informing you of our location," Severus said softly, glancing at the werewolf. "It was an oversight."

Remus held his gaze. "It wasn't your fault, Severus, and it turned out all right."

"Barely." Severus looked down at his son. "Draco's loss would have devastated him. He had just managed to come to terms with his feelings when Draco fell sick."

Remus sucked in a surprised breath. "I'm glad we could save him," he said fervently. He reached into his pocket and removed Neville's letter. "Speaking of which, this is from Neville. He couldn't make it, but he wrote this."

Severus came forward and snatched it from the werewolf's hand, reading it avidly. He wasn't about to let the bumbling Gryffindor say anything to Shadow that would remotely upset him at this point. He was happily surprised when it was both supportive and apologetic. He nodded and put the letter on the bedside table for Shadow when he woke up. "It was well written," he conceded.

Remus smiled, amber eyes glowing with happiness. "It will work out, Severus."

"That remains to be seen, but…" Severus gently smoothed down Shadow's curls. "I intend to make it so." Straightening, he inclined his head in the werewolf's direction and left the room.

Remus chuckled. He stood there a moment longer, just taking in the sight of two of the boys he had come to love so much. He smiled gently, feeling light with hope, before following after Severus. He gently shut the bedroom door behind him.
Lucius stared as the O in Draco stopped smoking and the rune circle slowly dimmed. "No," he growled lowly. But the magic continued to drain from the spell as he watched. "No!" He leapt to his feet. His hair flared out behind him in the breeze that was coming in from the balcony. "How is this possible?" he demanded, trembling with rage.

Narcissa stood rigidly, her eyes wide as she tried to contain her joyful triumph. Draco had survived. Her baby boy would live.

"It's not possible!" Lucius raged. His mind raced for an answer and his icy eyes narrowed as they fell on his wife. "Unless..."

Narcissa lifted her head, the grey eyes she had given to Draco silver with emotion.

Understanding dawned on Lucius's face and he lunged forward, backhanding her hard. Narcissa fell and allowed a fierce smile to bloom across her face. She looked up at her hated husband, beautiful and magnificent as her waist-length hair fell free from it's clasp and pooled around her. Lucius roared and cast the Cruciatius Curse. Narcissa screamed, writhing with agony.

"You bitch! You filthy traitor!" Lucius yelled in fury. He cast the Unforgivable Curse again, viciously.

Deep inside herself, underneath the pain, Narcissa burned brightly with delight. She had won, no matter what they did to her, she had WON. Draco would defeat his father. The Dark Lord would be overcome. She could see that so clearly now, and she howled with laughter even as she screamed.

Ginny smiled up at Mr. Lovegood as he opened his door. The elder man laughed and tugged her into his house, shutting the door behind her. Ginny stumbled a bit, surprised at the enthusiastic welcome.

"I'm so glad my little Luna has such friends. It's been so long since we've had such a busy birthday party. Tomorrow will be a glorious day. It's not every day you turn fifteen, after all." Mr. Lovegood laughed again and led her deeper into the house. "We'll have sweet meats and honey roasted peas. It'll be splendid."

"Oh, uh," Ginny stuttered, unsure how to explain that she hadn't come for Luna's birthday.

"Here you are." Mr. Lovegood opened a door onto the workroom. Luna and Neville's laughter drifted out to her. "I'll go make up your bedroom. Have fun."

Luna was sitting on one side of the long table making Nargol-repelling charms. Neville sat across from her, a strange plant in front of him. Trinkets, charms, potted plants, potions, feathers, bones, and a hundred other strange things lined the shelves until the walls were barely visible. The only light came in through a very small square window, casting the room mostly in shadows.

Ginny felt her eyes widen as Luna giggled and reached across the table to brush dirt from Neville's cheek. Jealousy stirred in the pit of her stomach. "Hey, guys," she said loudly, stepping forward.

"Gin!" Neville jumped to his feet and came over to her, a big smile on his face. "You're back to normal."

"Yeah." She took his hand and stood on tip-toe to kiss his cheek, covering the spot Luna had just touched. "They fixed me yesterday. Things are getting pretty intense there and, well, Mum didn't
want the kids around so we all went to see friends. When I got to your house, your grandmother said you came here."

"There was pressure at my house, too," Neville answered softly, the smile falling from his face and shadows entering his eyes.

"Do you want to work with us?" Luna called over.

"Sure." Ginny shrugged. She moved forward with Neville and took the stool beside him pointedly. "So your birthday is tomorrow, Luna? You were born on January first?"

"Yes." She nodded and tied a red feather on the necklace string. "Thank you for coming to my party. It will be fun. Are you staying until school like Neville?"

"Uh, yeah, if it's all right, I mean," Ginny said, flushed with embarrassment. "I, ah, didn't get you a present, Luna. I'm sorry. It's just been very busy and…"

"What are you talking about? Of course you got me a present. You came, didn't you?"

"I guess I did." Ginny smiled at the girl and pulled a necklace string toward her. "Pass the purple beads, please."

Neville grinned and slid them over.

xXx

Draco woke with a groan of pain. Blinking blurry eyes, the ceiling slowly came into focus. Every muscle in his body was tense and aching, his skin felt tight as if he had a sunburn, and there was the telltale taste of copper in his mouth. A strong hand slid between his shoulder blades and sat him up in one smooth motion. He gasped regardless, agony sparking through every limb, spiking in his head.

"Drink this."

Draco swallowed almost desperately. Anything to stop the pain. The potion's bitter taste filled his mouth, but the copper taste of blood wasn't so easily washed away. He opened his eyes, unaware he had shut them again, and stared at Lupin. "What happened?" He blinked when he heard his own voice, hoarse and weak.

"Lucius cast a familial blood curse," Remus answered gently, offering another potion while still holding the teenager in a sitting position.

Draco swallowed convulsively, scrambling for memories. He vaguely recalled coming in search of Severus when the nosebleed started. He'd known then what was happening. And he knew there was no cure. "How…?"

"Sirius made you his Heir." Remus just hoped that was as far as Draco asked. Toward this goal, he threw out a distraction. "Shadow was worried sick."

Draco followed the werewolf’s gaze, smoke-grey eyes widening when they fell on Shadow’s sleeping face. The skinny teen was on his side, under the covers. His dark curls splayed across the single pillow, his eyelids faintly blue, and his skin paler than normal, but what really got to Draco was Shadow’s reaching hand. It curled loosely in the crook of Draco’s elbow and Draco could almost remember feeling something roll off his chest when he sat up. He couldn't help it, he smiled, feeling a sweet pang in his heart.
"One more potion, Draco, and then you should go back to sleep. You've only slept six hours and your body needs time to recover." Remus handed the potion over and the blond took it without another question.

Draco lay back down and clumsily reached across his body, capturing Shadow's wrist and pulling his love's arm across his waist. Sighing, he closed his eyes, willing to sleep for a little bit more. The potions had helped greatly with the pain, but Draco knew it was hovering just out of reach. Hiding from it seemed like a good plan.

xXx

Hermione walked into the guest bedroom at home. Ron was awake and sitting in the window. He still had white bandages wrapped around his arms, but he was functional and aware again. He tired easily, but that was okay. Hermione didn't mind the break. So much had happened, so much was still happening. It was scary.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked softly, coming up behind him and staring out at the neighborhood and lawns. Most still had Christmas decorations up.

"I dream… weird things," Ron admitted. "Pomfrey says that they blurred the foreign impressions as much as they could, but I'll remember some of it." He sighed and pressed his forehead against the glass. "When I'm awake, I don't really think differently, but I feel different, if that makes sense. But the dreams… I'm always someone else in my dreams."

"Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry." Hermione wrapped her arms around her friend and held him tightly.

"I don't think I'll ever forget this Christmas. We didn't even get a chance to really celebrate it. It's so weird."

"I know what you mean. Christmas used to be this magical thing that could overcome anything, but now it's just a day. Nothing really magical about it at all."

"Whenever I used to complain about chores or doing stuff I didn't want to do, Mum would tell me growing up's painful." Ron laughed softly. "She wasn't kidding."


Ron smiled. His appetite was the one thing left unaffected.

Mrs. Granger smiled as they entered the small, warm kitchen. She placed the sugar-free cake on the table and the homey smell of baking wrapped around them both. Hermione smiled across the table at her friend and her heart fluttered when Ron smiled back. His face looked like it had before, the lines smoothing out and the shadows in his eyes disappearing for a little while. She cut a piece of cake. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't really very good either. It didn't matter. They ate it gratefully as Hermione's mother made plans for them all to go see a movie that night.

xXx

Draco was sleeping when Shadow woke and he carefully slipped out of the bed. His first stop was the bathroom where he relieved his bladder. He was so hungry, he almost skipped a shower, but he felt way too grungy. He couldn't believe he'd slept almost twenty-four hours, but he did feel better for it. He'd even say he felt good if it weren't for his stomach being achingly empty. It was a sensation that reminded him that he hadn't eaten in days.

He rinsed off the last of the soap and hurried into his clothes in record time. He was just pulling on
his shirt when he felt it. Grief and guilt slammed into his empathy shields like a tidal wave. With a startled cry, Shadow fell to his knees as his block crumbled completely. Deep concern, regret, and even a hint of pride, a different source than the grief that surged and swirled, eddied by guilt; it was foam on the wave. Fury slowly built from the depths of that grief, making the emotions boil. Shadow flinched, his arms coming around himself as he felt it swell. He cried out as he slowly began to go under, lost among the powerful feelings. They slowly became his own, possessing him.

He growled. His face twisted with soul shattering grief and his eyes began to glow as his fists lashed out at the marble floor. Blood smeared across the stone, but he didn't care. He lifted his fist again, but a hand grabbed his shoulder and instantly his shields were bolstered. Shadow squirmed, trying to put distance between himself and the emotions that had felt like his own, but they were now peeling away like old paint.

Trembling, he looked up into his father's dark, fathomless eyes. "What was that?"

"Black felt Draco needed to understand the situation. Against Lupin's and my advice, he let Draco read yesterday's paper."

"That was Draco?" Alarmed, Shadow leapt to his feet.

Severus restrained him and explained quickly, "The Prophet reported that Draco's mother walked into the Ministry's atrium and cast the Dark Mark into the air before killing herself with the Killing Curse. Examining her body revealed evidence of severe Crucius damage as well as lingering impressions of the Imperius."

"God," Shadow whispered and yanked free from his father's hand.

He practically ran into his bedroom. Draco was sitting up, propped up on pillows. A steaming cup of something was on the bedside table. Sirius was sitting straight and tall in a chair pulled up to the bedside, his face hard but also compassionate. The Daily Prophet lay open in Draco's lap. Shadow read the title of the article at a glance: NOT EVEN PUREBLOODS ARE SAFE. Draco's expression was shattered, devastated.

"She died defying the Dark Lord. She wouldn't bend her will or her magic; a true Black until the very end. Her death will not be in vain. We will remember her example and honor it," Sirius said softly, eyes pinned to the blond Slytherin.

Shadow heard something like ritual in those words, but he had no idea what it meant besides the obvious. It had a profound effect on Draco, though. Fury and then a painful pride flew across his face before settling into something cold, dangerous, and determined. Magic slashed through the air, tasting of cold steel. Draco's eyes were silver.

"Narcissa's name will not be forgotten. My mother's killers will pay for their transgression against the House of Black."

Sirius nodded and clasped his hand. He stood and bowed deeply to Draco and left the room without a word. Shadow fleetingly wondered what had happened to his godfather - the eternal prankster and irresponsible man - but that was dropped as he focused on his best friend. Draco's hands were clenched in the bed sheets, crumpling the paper. His knuckles were white and he was trembling. Shadow took a step toward him and Draco looked up.

"I need a few moments," he said tightly, obviously exerting an amazing amount of self-control.

Shadow hesitated, but he finally nodded, feeling the emotions slowly rising against his barriers once
more. He'd be useless to Draco if he was sucked under into hysteria again. It would only make
Draco feel worse, so he turned and walked away, shutting the door behind him and went in search of
his father. He needed to stay close so that Severus's Occlumency could support his own.

xXx

Draco had locked himself in Shadow's room since yesterday. Omi popped in several times to deliver
food, but the elf didn't speak and Draco was glad. He felt like spun glass, but he couldn't sleep. He
pulled open the door and wondered where everyone else was. Probably sleeping.

Piano music reached his ears and he slumped gratefully. He didn't want to be alone, but he didn't
want to disturb anyone either. He hurried down the hallway and entered the music room. Music
swelled around him. Shadow sat at the bench, head bowed, pounding on the keys. The relentless
beat snapped and eddied around more melodious notes. There was nothing gentle in it, angry and
loud and barely in control. The deep bass notes vibrated in his chest. Draco wrapped his arms around
his chest and leaned against the door, giggling, hysteria creeping in at the edges.

Shadow stopped and turned to face him, his blue and green eyes wide with surprise. Draco couldn't
stop now that he started. He laughed loud now and, with a shock, he realized he was crying. Shadow
hurried over and pulled him into his arms. That surprised Draco enough to still and become quiet.

"We'll get them, Draco," Shadow whispered, hoarse. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault." Draco pushed him away so that he could unfold his arms and drape them around
Shadow's shoulders. "My mother… She was a wonderful woman. She was stronger than even I
knew. I'm proud of her for standing up against them. She saved my life." But even as he said it, tears
coursed down his face, bitter and cold. As proud of her as he was, as grateful, he was also
desperately hurt. He'd miss her. She was his mother. He didn't want her to be dead.

"Shhh," Shadow soothed, his hand combing through Draco's silky hair.

That did it. Draco broke down and sobbed into his love's shoulder, clutching to him as if his life
depended on it. They fell to their knees and Shadow rocked softly from side to side, holding him
tightly. Draco screamed, so lost in his grief he almost didn't hear Shadow begin to hum. The melody
was soft, a lullaby. Draco's screams tapered off to chest-wracking sobs.

They knelt there for an eternity. Their knees grew numb, then their legs, but neither of them moved.
Shadow never stopped humming. Eventually Draco ran out of energy, if not emotion, and he fell
silent. Shadow allowed his song to come to an end and Draco shivered as he felt dry lips brush his
temple.

"Shadow…” he sighed, still shattered and weak.

The curly-haired teen didn't answer verbally. Instead, he cupped Draco's raw cheeks and stared into
his eyes. Draco had no idea what he saw there, but the glowing affection and strength in Shadow's
soothed Draco's wild emotions. Shadow slowly leaned forward, never breaking eye contact. They
kissed; soft, chaste, just a pressure against their lips.

Draco moaned and tightened his hold around Shadow's neck. One hand slipped up into those
gorgeous curls and his eyes fluttered closed as he opened his mouth, his tongue tasting Shadow's
lips. Fog suffused his mind, making it feel almost like a familiar dream when Shadow's mouth parted
warmly around his. Their tongues brushed gently together, retreated. Lips came together again,
sliding against each other before opening slightly for another taste. He let Shadow's tongue slip into
his mouth. Each gentle swipe along his teeth and palate sent shivers down his spine. He clutched at
Shadow's back, the sharp wing-like bones hard and solid beneath his hand.

Vaguely, he realized he was sitting against the door, his legs sprawled out to either side of Shadow, who was sitting sideways, both legs draped over Draco's right and bent at the knee. Shadow's hip pressed into Draco's crotch, a delicious steady pressure, while his chest pressed against Draco's own, warming him through. Shadow sucked his tongue into his mouth gently, teeth lightly scraping, and hummed. The sensation made Draco groan, his hand slipping down the sharp shoulder blades to splay across Shadow's outside hip, pressing him more firmly against him.

Shadow pulled away and Draco almost didn't let him go. Arousal and a desperate need flooded through his veins, but even half out of his mind he knew better than to hold Shadow against his will. He closed his eyes tight, his whole body throbbing with every rapid heartbeat. He panted, sweat dewing on his forehead, as he listened to Shadow's every move, every sense riveted on his best friend.

Cloth rustled and Draco's eyes flew open. Shadow had taken off his shirt and was kneeling once again. With his pale, skinny chest exposed, Draco could see the light pink scar wrapping around his side. Further up, he saw that his darker nipples were tight and sticking up. Draco couldn't stop the hand that reached and brushed against a small nub. It was as soft as Draco had expected it would be.

"Shadow…"

The whispered name made his love shiver and press against his hand, practically arching, as he tried to get more of the delicious contact. The sight was so erotic Draco's heart began to gallop. Adrenaline flooded his system and he moved. With one fluid movement, he pulled his shirt over his head and pressed forward. His hand gently lowered Shadow to the floor so that they were laying chest to chest, Shadow's legs wrapping loosely around the back of his thighs. Draco's blood pounded in his ears; it was all he could hear as their skin, damp and warm, slid smoothly against each other with every heaving breath. Shadow's pupils were dilated, his cheeks flushed, his lips swollen. He was gorgeous.

Draco captured his mouth and practically stabbed his tongue forward, certain he'd die if he didn't taste him that instant. Shadow moaned, clutching at Draco's shoulders, nails indenting his skin as his hips arched and flexed. Instinctive and primal, they moved against each other, rocking and rocking, as their tongues thrust and parried. Their hands clutched and grabbed, trying to pull their bodies together. Panting, groaning moans, breathy gasps, filled their ears, each sound sending electricity spiking along their spine, down to every pulsing nerve.

Draco savagely ground his hips into Shadow's, certainly leaving bruises, but the pain swirled with the pleasure until they were almost there, almost had what they needed. Shadow cried out softly, arching up into his every thrust, his head tossing from side to side, helpless as Draco was to reach the point that hovered just beyond their grasp. Draco dipped his head and bit desperately at Shadow's neck, felt his love's pulse beat against his tongue and whined deep in his throat, needing only a little shove to tip over the cliff and fly.

"Draco…" Shadow gasped, his legs instinctively opening wider as his hips thrust upward desperately. "Please…"

Draco exploded as that breathy plea reached his ears. The orgasm rocked him backward and he cried out hoarsely, "Merlin, god, fucking hell!" Shaking, his muscles shivered as wave after wave of pleasure catapulted through his body. Almost blind, Draco collapsed forward and grabbed Shadow's curls in a vicious grip. His other hand snaked between them, tore the button on Shadow's slacks, and
slipped around his lover's steel hard need. His hand moved firmly down the hot shaft, pumping in hard, short strokes.

"Cum for me, love," he ordered hoarsely, eyes glowing.

Shadow screamed as he tipped over the edge, thrusting erratically against Draco's palm. His fingers spasm as his whole body went rigid, nails drawing blood. Draco hardly felt the sting, eyes riveted on Shadow's face, the scent of Shadow's pleasure filling his nose as it spurt between their chests. Shadow went limp, and Draco pressed his forehead against his, their breath mingling. Their hearts slowed, the rhythm coming together until all they could hear was a single heartbeat.

Draco slipped his hand free as he fell to the side. Shadow's face turned with him so they never lost contact, and Draco brought his soiled hand between them and licked at it. The bitter tang burst across his tongue and he felt his eyes widen with pleasure. It didn't taste good exactly, but it tasted like Shadow and sex and that had his nerves shivering anew.

Shadow watched him with tired eyes for a moment before his pink tongue flicked out and he tasted himself. Overwhelmed by the sight, Draco kissed him hard, trying to convey his thanks, his love. Shadow kissed him back, his hand stroking Draco's sweat-soaked back soothingly, and Draco pulled away chuckling, finding it ironic that Shadow was trying to calm him when he was still afraid that this was too much too soon after Lockhart.

"What?" Shadow asked lazily, eyes at half-mast.

"Nothing." Draco shook his head and forced himself to move. As much as he wanted to cuddle up with his love and get some sleep, he was getting cold, he was sticky, and they were lying on the hard floor. A few quick spells with his wand had the first two problems solved. "Come on. Let's get into bed."

Shadow accepted his hand and stood. He picked up his shirt and pulled it on, glad it covered his broken pants. He scowled at the grinning Slytherin. Unrepentant, Draco took his hand and they walked silently to Shadow's bedroom, hands loosely clasped. Quickly changing into pajamas, they crawled under the covers. Shadow hissed, his crotch aching and hips sore.

"Did I hurt you?" Draco asked worriedly.

"I could use some ointment," Shadow admitted. He closed his eyes and rolled onto his side facing the blond, leaving a few inches between them. "Tomorrow."

Draco studied his love's face. He saw no distress there, but it still upset him. "I'm sorry."

Shadow opened his eyes and frowned at Draco's expression. "Not this again." He slapped Draco's shoulder hard. "Stop it. I'm fine."

"I shouldn't hurt you, Shadow," he protested seriously, capturing his hand. "It shouldn't be like that."

Sighing, Shadow fell on his back, his free arm flung across his eyes. "I liked it. I'm fine."

"Shadow…" Draco said darkly.

"Trust me," Shadow snapped sharply. "You don't understand. Leave it alone, okay?"

Draco brushed his fingers gently along the forearm that hid Shadow's eyes. "I'm just worried. I don't want to hurt you."
"I know." He rolled over, freeing his arm from Draco's grasp, and put his back to the blond. "Look, it felt wonderful. You felt wonderful. Can't you just leave it at that?"

"Not when you do this," Draco countered and poked him between his shoulders.

Shadow sat up violently, hissing again at the pain. He glared down at his love, understanding his concern, but desperately not wanting to explore his own feelings. But suddenly they were there and they were pouring out. "Lockhart didn't hurt me," he hissed coldly. "What he did was soft and slow, and I lay there and I took it because it felt so damn good! You don't remind me of it. What we do together is so different that it's not even in the same category! It's fast and hot, and sure it hurts a little, but that reminds me that I'm with you. There's not this faraway place of gentle consuming pleasure. And when you do this, when you question and apologize, it makes me feel like shit. Like maybe I'm fucked up or something for liking it."

Draco sat up and pulled the furiously panting teen into a tight embrace. Shadow struggled for a moment, but then gave in, going limp against his chest. Draco's mind was racing. He had pictured some violent encounter, a vicious rape of a twelve-year-old child, but slow and pleasurable never crossed his mind. He didn't know what to think or what it meant, but he could feel Shadow trembling in his arms and he hated that he was the one to upset him.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I didn't understand. You're not messed up, Shadow. Of if you are, I'm messed up in the exact same way. I like it like that, too. It's not weird. I just didn't know if it was okay for you. I think it's obvious that it's perfectly fine for me." He smiled into Shadow's eyes, hoping he would be forgiven.


"I won't make you talk about it ever again as long as you promise that you'll tell me if something does bother you."

"Got it." Shadow rolled his eyes. "Now can we sleep?"

Draco laughed. "Sure." He pulled his lover down with him, and this time, it was he who rolled onto his side and draped a protective arm across his love's chest.

xXx

As they rode the train toward Hogwarts, Ginny, Neville, and Luna discreetly spread the word down the train that the DA would meet that night. Most everyone had come back, their parents believing rightly that Hogwarts was the safest place for them, so they expected most of the group to show up. After the Welcoming Feast, Ginny made her way to the Room of Requirement with her boyfriend and Luna in tow.

Luna wandered off to look at some of the books that appeared on a large shelf in the corner while Neville and Ginny conversed quietly up front.

"Shadow's not coming back," Neville said softly. "He would have been here by now."

"The Ministry is looking for him," Ginny reminded. "We knew he might not come. We need to continue the DA. Shadow would have wanted us to."

"Draco's missing. What if the Slytherins don't come now?" Neville frowned. "It was important that we all work together."

"Maybe they will come, Nev. We'll just have to wait and see." Ginny placed her hand on his arm,
her eyes bright with excitement and strength.

Neville smiled down at her. He admired her so much. He wanted to help prepare everyone for battle, to keep what his brother had created going, but he wouldn't be able to stand up here taking a leading position if it weren't for her. He turned as he heard the door opened and a few people came trickling in. Hermione came to the front to stand by Ginny and Neville. She stood tall and proud. Within ten minutes, everyone was there and a hush fell, waiting to hear the plan.

"Tonight I thought we'd…" Hermione began, but was interrupted.

"Where's Shadow and Snape?"

"Did they go into hiding?"

"What about the rest of us?"

"Shadow's the one who said we needed to fight!"

"Everybody listen up!" Ginny yelled and clapped her hands. "Shadow isn't running away. He's not here because the Ministry wants to lock him and his father away. They have things to do in this war and they're doing them."

Hermione interrupted, afraid Ginny would say too much. They couldn't let anyone else find out that Shadow and Harry Potter were the same person. "We're here to learn to defend ourselves, regardless of what Shadow or anyone else does. If you have a problem with that, leave. No one is going to save us. Not Shadow, not a teacher, not the Ministry, and not Harry. We have to learn to protect ourselves. That is the only concern of this group."

Neville spoke up before the muttering could get out of hand. "I'm going to pass out a piece of parchment. I want everyone to write down what they are best at defensively and offensively. That way we all have a chance to teach something to the group. Just because Shadow's gone, I don't want anyone thinking that this is going to turn into a Gryffindor thing. His rule of House equality stands."

The few Slytherins in the room looked surprised at this as everyone began talking about what they could write down, not seeming to bat an eye at that.

"Okay," Hermione called, catching everyone's attention. She had gone over the parchment and circled the ones that seemed most promising. "We'll work on old stuff for an hour every meeting and then someone will come up and we'll work on something new for the second hour. Angelina Johnson will help us with the Tectum Haurio shield tonight. Wednesday night, Blaise Zabini will help us with the Blinding Hex combined with the Muting Curse. Friday, Brandy Cadbury will help us with the Patronus. Saturday night, Rogan Harper will teach us Concealment Charms. Make sure you have your coins, I'll use them to post the exact times we'll meet."

"And make sure the spokesmen for each House talks to anyone who wants to learn how to defend themselves," Ginny added. "I know there is no one in Slytherin House anymore who can talk about the DA, so Hermione's going to take the secrecy charm off one of you. Decide who and come over here after practice."

This said, they got down to business, working through the spells that they had covered so far: the Disarming Hex, the Stinging Hex aimed at the opponent's wand hand, Protego, and a few others. Not everyone had all of them down perfectly, but they were getting better. When the hour was up, Angelina came forward and began to demonstrate the new shield.

Protego only blocked a single spell. Everyone could see the disadvantages to that, so Shadow had
taught them the Tectussitum shield before break. It would remain for a longer period, blocking multiple spells. Tectum Haurio was the next shield up from that and actually absorbed the offensive spell cast at it to strengthen it and keep it going, but it was difficult to cast successfully. Angelina could only do it half the time, but she dutifully tried to show the others what she knew.

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Monday, January 4th 1996

Professor Severus Snape Missing

Suspected of Child Abuse and Death Eater Activities

The Ministry has been looking for Professor Snape for weeks, needing answers to some questions regarding Albus Dumbledore's death, as well as answers to his whereabouts when Azkaban and the Ministry were attacked. Last fall, the Ministry was concerned that he would go missing, so the Wizengamot decided it wise to place a tracking spell on Snape, but by an act of Dark magic, the spell was removed shortly before Christmas when Snape disappeared from Hogwarts.

"There is no other way the monitoring device could have been removed," Minister Fudge told this reporter gravely. "I am deeply concerned, especially because his son is now missing."

Shadow Snape, age fourteen, grew up secretly with his father. No one knew of his existence until this past summer when the horrendous truth of his conception came to light. WCS was concerned by some of the behavior Shadow exhibited and scheduled a time to check up on the young teen over the break to see what his home life was really like, but the Snapes were nowhere to be found.

Greatly disturbed, the Ministry kept a quiet lookout for both Snapes, not yet willing to make their suspicions known to the public. On Monday, December 28th, they finally received a lead. Very late Sunday night, Shadow arrived agitated at the Longbottom House. Neville Longbottom, a year above Shadow, is reported to be one of Shadow's good friends and, after interviewing the family, the Aurors discovered that Shadow arrived distressed and in disarray. He was too upset to even talk. With good intentions, Madam Longbottom contacted Professor Snape, who arrived angry and distant. He collected his son and they disappeared once more into the night, unable to be tracked.

WCS suspects Shadow had fled his father in fear. Now that he has not returned to Hogwarts, they fear the worst - that the child, perhaps habitually abused, is now suffering at his father's hand for attempting to escape. Shadow may be in desperate trouble. The Ministry cannot hold its silence any longer. They ask all of the Wizarding World to keep an eye out for both Professor Snape and his young son. The Minister discourages any direct action and asks that any sightings be reported immediately.

"Severus Snape is a convicted Death Eater," Fudge reminds this reporter, "who was given leniency due to his supposed effort for the Light. However, Dumbledore was the only one who could verify that claim and he's now dead. There is some new evidence in the murder investigation that points to Snape being involved, but he will not come in and answer these allegations. He is also breaking the terms he agreed to with the Ministry regarding his son. Any help would be greatly appreciated, but I ask that everyone remain cautious during these troubled times."

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And so the board was set. Severus and Shadow would not be able to go into public without being hunted down, all in the name of the Ministry's false justice. There mission had just gotten ten times harder.
Chapter end.
Remus had gone back to Hogwarts to teach History, leaving Sirius, Severus, Draco, and Shadow to look for the locket. The problem was that all four of them were wanted by the Ministry, and the Ministry made sure everyone in the Wizarding World would be watching them. They couldn't exactly wander around without drawing unwanted attention to themselves and Polyjuice wasn't viable for long term use. Severus, Shadow, and Sirius could use their Animagus forms, but they couldn't exactly ask questions as a bat, lynx, and a Grimm, and that wouldn't help Draco who had yet to master the transformation.

"No one has turned me in yet," Sirius insisted. "I go around as a dog and then transform when I have questions. No problem."

"Everyone believes you are the Dark Lord's Lieutenant," Severus snarled. "They're too terrified to turn you in, but you never know, perhaps they did alert the authorities once you were gone. We don't want anyone to realize what we are searching for. It's imperative we find the locket and destroy it."

Shadow waited until it was clear that no one else would come up with a solution. "I think I know what to do."

He led them out into Muggle Italy for disguises. The first place he stopped was a hair salon. The wizards with him looked doubtful that Muggles could actually help and Shadow just smiled knowingly. Everyone spoke in Italian of course, but Severus had cast a temporary language spell on them before they'd left the house. All they could hear was English and all the Muggles heard when they spoke was Italian.

Four hours later and much grumbling about the disgusting chemicals and torturous process, Severus came out with light brown hair streaked with blond. It was cut close to his scull and spiked, giving him an expensive, Muggle executive look. Sirius's dark brown hair had been changed to a rich auburn red color. He kept it shoulder-length, but now it was curly instead of just wavy. As for Draco, the hair stylist really went all out.

The former blond now had deep black hair. They cut it short in the back, but left his chin-length bangs alone. They styled it in a side sweep, so that the left side of his face was exposed, but it covered the other half. With his pale skin and lean, lanky form, he looked like a stereotypical emo teenager.

Draco took one look at himself in the mirror and asked to excuse himself, voice soft, pained. Shadow shot a look at the frowning Severus and Sirius and went after him. A discrete spell unlocked the bathroom door and Shadow slipped inside. Draco was leaning on the sink, forehead pressed in the mirror, tears dripping down his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he whispered, voice ragged.

Shadow put a gentle hand on his shoulder, turning him. Draco went willingly into his embrace. “It’s okay,” Shadow promised him.

They stood like that for several minutes before Draco pulled away. He faced the mirror again and wet a paper towel. His face scrunched at the texture, making Shadow laugh.
“What is this?” Draco demanded.

Shadow shook his head and grabbed some toilet paper. Draco looked horrified, but at least it was softer. They returned to the others in the salon. The stylist looked very nervous.

Shadow gave the man a reassuring smile, taking Draco’s hand. “I love it. You did a great job.”

Draco blushed and lifted a hand to tuck his bangs behind his ear. He shot his love an evaluative glance. “Yeah, you did a great job.”

They had straightened Shadow’s hair, which lengthened it to his shoulders, and parted it in the middle. Then they dyed it a chestnut brown color. Shadow gave Draco a smirk and began to thank all the people who had worked on their total make-overs. A few pictures were taken. Severus scowled at all this while Draco stood quietly at his side.

"I'm not done yet," Shadow reassured his father when Severus remarked this wasn't enough of a change.

Before leaving the salon, he had looked in the phone book. He called them a taxi and fifteen minutes later they walked into an optometrist clinic. Because they were looking for non-prescriptive colored contacts, they could buy them immediately. Nothing needed to be ordered. Everyone chose quickly and the sales clerk helped them put them in.

Because Severus's eyes were so dark, they decided to use a medium brown. It would lighten his eye color, but wouldn't look too fake. Sirius also went for brown, which complimented his new auburn hair color. Draco however chose a remarkable blue-violet that was breathtaking when combined with his black hair, long bangs, and angular features. Shadow's mouth dropped open.

"You're beautiful," he whispered in Draco’s ear while Severus and Sirius argued about whether they were disguised enough yet.

Draco smirked at him, vastly pleased, and fiddled with his bangs as he examined himself in the mirror. He still felt a pang, but it helped enormously that although he looked less like Narcissa, he also looked less like Lucius.

"And how may I help you, sir?" the clerk asked.

Shadow smiled. "I want a blue one to cover the green."

"It is a remarkable feature. It's a shame to conceal it," the man said with a frown, but he reached for the blue contacts nonetheless.

"I agree," Draco said and held Shadow's gaze. Shadow could see just how much Draco liked his two-colored eyes with that one look and he shivered, feeling warm.

"Severus, Sirius," Shadow called once he had two blue eyes. "I'm not done yet, so stop arguing about whether we're recognizable."

"What else could Muggles possibly do?" Severus asked with a sneer.

"You'll see, but you should change your mannerisms. That's going to keep us hidden more than anything else," Shadow warned.

Severus nodded and arranged his features into something more pleasant but still stern. Sirius snickered, but followed his lead, going the other way. He straightened his shoulders and tried to look
more authoritative. Draco, on the other hand, slouched, adopting a more casual pose quite different from his Pureblood mannerisms.

Shadow took them to a day-spa. They got there just before it closed and with some shameless flirting on Sirius's part, they got a quick session with some tanning lotion and the tanning beds. After an hour, they came out a few degrees darker. A spray-on-tan added by a professional finished the job, giving them a healthy almond color that was far from the pale white that was natural for all four of them.

"Are we done now?" Draco asked. He scratched at his arm with a frown. Tanning was not something he had enjoyed. It was creepy and it stank to high-heaven.

"Let's eat first, but we have one more stop."

Everyone groaned.

They decided on an Italian restaurant. They were in Italy! Might as well enjoy the local cuisine. The food gave everyone their second wind, so when Shadow took them to a clothing store, they weren't too unhappy.

"We can't dress like Muggles," Severus said softly.

"We're not here for the clothes. We're here for the shoes. You need flat ones to make you a bit shorter," Shadow explained, leading them to the shoe department.

"And, let me guess, you want heels," Draco drawled, flinging an arm around the shorter teen's skinny shoulders.

"Shut up," Shadow muttered, pushing his arm off, but secretly he was pleased. Draco had started this day withdrawn. Shadow was glad he was coming out of it a little bit.

An hour later after some joking around, they walked out of the store with Severus shorter by an inch, Shadow taller by three inches, Draco taller by an inch so that he matched Shadow's new height, and Sirius taller by an inch, making him even with the now shorter Severus. They found an empty alley and Apparated back home. A close examination of their new appearances when they put on Wizarding robes and Severus deemed them all thoroughly disguised.

"Well done, Shadow," he praised his son. "We look completely different."

"Thank you," Shadow smiled shyly up at the man, still only coming up to his chin.

"All right." Sirius clapped his hands. "Let's get this show on the road."

Unlike Remus, they couldn't travel legally, so Severus made a few floo-calls and arranged for them to acquire a one-way portkey back to England. Because they wouldn't be able to have easy access to the house, which was now in another country, they'd have to live in tents and such, basically backpacking across England and avoiding contact with others as much as possible. They had two magical tents and Omi carefully packed them with clothes and food. The elf looked extremely worried for his family.

"We're counting on you to keep the house safe," Shadow said seriously, kneeling down and holding Omi's gaze.

"I be guarding the house, no worries young Master," Omi said tearfully. "Yous just be careful."
"Shadow," Severus called, holding the front door open. Sirius and Draco were already waiting outside, two large backpacks at their feet.

The teenager stood and looked around at the hall, the staircase that led to his bedroom, the sitting room and parlor... This was his home and he wouldn't be back for a very long while, he suspected. Not until the war was over, most likely; unless things went really wrong and they needed a fast get away. Shadow was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

He was actually surprised at how hard he was finding the idea of abandoning their house completely. He'd never imagined he'd become so attached to a physical place. It had been a long time since he had felt so distinctly like Rose. He ran his finger reassuringly over his portkey ring on his right index finger and took a deep breath.

"Coming." Taking one last look, Shadow turned and walked out the front door, leaving Omi standing alone in the hallway, his ears drooping and his large eyes full of tears.

Once his son was outside, Severus turned and faced his front door. The house looked nice, the ramshackle front left behind in England. Now the walls were painted white with red, wooden shutters, and a sleek black door. Two brick chimney stacks rose into the sky, smoke faintly rising from them, a promise of warmth and comfort. He twitched his wand and flicked a few drops of his blood at the door, and the house faded from sight, locked up tight.

Shadow sucked in a breath, hating the unexpected anxiety he was feeling. A hand slipped into his and he looked over into Draco's new violet eyes. Tossing long black bangs from his face, Draco squeezed Shadow's hand reassuringly. Shadow nodded and straightened his back. He was being stupid.

Severus turned around and hefted one of the backpacks. Sirius lifted the other and the four of them clutched the golden watch, their hands piled together. A sharp yank at the navels and then they were gone. International portkeys were stronger than normal portkeys and the ride was rough. They landed on a knoll in the middle of the countryside about thirty miles south of London. Shadow immediately collapsed to his knees and vomited. Draco was dry-heaving next to him. Even Sirius and Severus had to sit for a minute, looking green around the edges.

After about five minutes, Severus collected himself and stood. "We have a lot of ground to cover. There are forty-seven Wizarding pawnshops in England and Sirius has only checked twelve. I suggest we split up into pairs."

"I'll take Draco," Sirius agreed. He ran his hand through his curly auburn hair, the gesture automatic, and grimaced as his fingers got caught in the tangles.

"We should keep appraised of each other's position and condition, however," Severus continued. He put his newly tanned hand into his robe pocket and pulled out two Muggle compact mirrors. "My informant included these as a gift." He sneered sarcastically. The mirrors were an attempt make up for the exuberant price he had paid for the international portkey. "We can communicate through them and should do so every five hours."

Sirius nodded and took one of the compacts. Shoulderling the backpack, he turned to Shadow and flashed his famous grin. Shadow sighed, knowing what was coming. Sure enough, his godfather pulled him into a tight hug. "Good luck."

"Thanks," he said dryly, but did hugged the man back. Sirius stepped away and Shadow looked over at Draco. "Be careful. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."
The Slytherin smiled. "Same to you."

Sliding a glance first at his father and then Sirius, Shadow stepped up to Draco and kissed him, his hands sliding through the long bangs and into the now short black hair which tickled at his palms. Draco wrapped his arms around Shadow’s slender waist and held him there possessively. Sirius wolf-whistled and both teenagers flushed as they came apart.

"Let's go," Severus intoned and gently took hold of Shadow’s arm. Sirius did the same to Draco.

The four of them disappeared with a loud crack. The race was on.

xXx

Fred and George walked into DADA feeling absolutely giddy. This was the moment of sweet revenge. They had their flesh carved from their backs, their peers had been prevented from learning how to defend themselves, and - worst of all - Shadow had been targeted and labeled a menace. Now that the Ministry had admitted You-Know-Who was back, Umbitch's whole 'What would you possibly need to defend yourselves from?' line had been blown to smithereens. She'd have to admit she was wrong and everyone was really looking forward to that sweet moment of justice.

But as they walked to their seats and saw the hated teacher standing calmly at the front of the room in a horrid lavender robe, they knew that they were hoping in vain to see some remorse, some actual shame. Umbitch stood with her hands were clasped demurely in front of her and she was smiling a soft, sweet smile as if nothing had changed. That just a week ago the Dark Lord hadn't made an appearance and freed all his Death Eaters from Azkaban.

"Everyone open your books to page two-nineteen. Read the last two paragraphs and then answer these questions." Umbridge flicked her wand and five questions appeared on the board.

George had had enough. He stood and all eyes turned toward him. "Professor Umbridge," he asked sweetly. "Don't you think it's time we actually learned spells now, considering the dangers You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters present to us and our families?"

"Dear boy," Umbridge simpered, her blue eyes wide with a false innocence. "You have nothing to worry about. The Ministry and the Aurors will protect you. Soon the crisis will be over. There is nothing to fear."

Fred stood up next to his twin. "Are you saying that there's no chance of being attacked or wounded? That each and every one of us will have our own Auror bodyguards to defend us?"

"I'm saying you are safe here, and by the time school is over, the Ministry will have things in hand," Umbridge returned, her face losing its harmless expression.

"What if the school is attacked?" Fred snapped, hands fisted on the desk. "We need to know how to defend ourselves."

"What if we want to be Aurors? Shouldn't we know some defense?" George pressed furiously.

"The school is protected by very strong magic. If you decide to become Aurors, then you will be trained in the Auror program after graduation. Now sit down and do your work," Umbridge said lowly, taking a threatening step forward, her blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

George almost flinched and immediately hated himself for that weakness. "What are you so afraid of that you won't teach us how to defend ourselves?" he demanded hotly.
"Detention, Mr. Weasley!" Umbridge snapped. "Now sit down!"

"Actually," Fred sneered hatefully, an expression no one had seen on him before. "I think my brother and I have decided that this class is unproductive, overall. We're dropping Defense."

"This is unprecedented! I'll be talking to the Headmistress about this! You'll be expelled!" Umbridge cried furiously, her curls bouncing, as the twins walked out.

xXx

McGonagall stared stonily at the witch sitting across her desk. The edict from the Ministry lay under her tightly clasped hands. "Regardless of Minister Fudge's certainty of your competency, what experience do you have to suggest you would fulfill the post of Potion's instructor. I am not aware that you achieved a Masters in the art."

"I am not a Master of Potions, but my skills are adequate for the job, Headmistress. I'm afraid I do not need your permission. The edict states that the Ministry may chose whomever it sees fit if the Headmistress does not fill an empty post within twenty-four hours."

McGonagall's hands clenched, her fingers turning white. She had suspected Severus would not return, but she had not found a suitable replacement. She intended to teach the class herself, but the Minister refused, saying her job of Headmistress needed all her time. Conveniently, the Minister did not inform her of this decision until the first day had past and she had no choice but to accept his replacement.

"You must be delusional, Alecto, to believe I am ignorant of your alliance with the Dark Lord," she said coldly.

Alecto Carrow's pockmarked face smiled, her dark eyes dead as she gazed back. "The Ministry is well aware of my position. I was unfortunately forced into my place among the Dark and have rightfully offered to make my sacrifice useful by being the Ministry's informant," the woman said in humor.

"I know exactly what you are," McGonagall snapped and pressed her hands flat to the desk.

Just then the door opened and Umbridge stepped in, her face red with fury. She hardly acknowledged Alecto. "Professor Carrow," she muttered before squaring off in front of the Headmistress's desk. "I demand that you expel those… those… monstrous boys!"

"I will leave you to discuss things," Alecto stood. Her shoulders were hunched and one arm was longer than the other, the curl of a black tattoo could just be made out below the sleeve. McGonagall clenched her jaw to prevent herself from barring her teeth.

Umbridge waited until Alecto left the room before continuing. "They constantly rebel against authority and their disrespect for authority is astonishing!"

"Our opinions about students are not enough to expel them. There must be a recordable offense," McGonagall responded, voice tight, her back rigidly straight.

"They disrupted my class and then walked out! They cast aspersions on the Ministry's laws!" Umbridge spat, eye blazing. "I will not stand for this!"

"Your power has grown, but I still hold the final say in expulsion." McGonagall stood and gazed down at the hated woman. "I've accepted the Ministry's appointed Potions Professor, despite her allegiance with the Dark, but the twins are Seventh-years and Defense Against the Dark Arts is an
elective past Fifth-year. They may drop it as they wish. The detention you assigned them for disruption will stand. One detention, Professor Umbridge," Minerva insisted when a cold smile alighted on the toad-like face. "They are still students here, however."

Umbridge held Minerva's gaze and nodded. "Very well, but I'd be cautious if I were you, Minerva." She spun and left the room, closing the door softly after her.

McGonagall slumped back in her chair. Furiously, she unbound her hair and pressed her face into her hands. She sat like that for a long moment before she felt she had control enough to reach into her desk and take out the crystal pyramid within. She centered it on her desk, saying, "Burning day."

"You're an hour late checking in, Minerva," Shacklebolt's voice rumbled up from the crystal.

McGonagall smiled grimly. "Sorry to worry you, boys, but it seems I am not fit to teach Potions. The Ministry sent me a DE."

"Who?" Charlie asked, voice serious.

"Alecto Carrow."

"Better than her pedophile brother," Shacklebolt said darkly. "The first and second year girls wouldn't be safe."

"I don't think his sister is going to prove to be any less repulsive." McGonagall reached back and began to braid her hair tightly, frown-lines deepening around her eyes and mouth. "How are things on your end?"

"The Ministry is in an uproar. The public is growing more tense and the papers are speculating like mad." Shacklebolt tired sigh echoed up to her. "The Aurors are jumping at shadows and arresting people like Stan Shunpike who are relatively innocent just to say they are making progress. Not to mention the large amount of Aurors taken off patrol duty to search the country for the Snapes."

"Speaking of, we have yet to find any leads to Shadow's whereabouts, either," Charlie added. "Mundungus has reported that his usual contacts and shady friends are disappearing. I believe the Death Eaters are about to make their move. The Dark Lord has had almost two weeks to plan his real debut. Azkaban was just a warm-up."

"Not good news on any front, gentleman. We need to find and protect Harry. He's our only hope. The Ministry and the Death Eaters are bound to be looking for him. We have to find him first. And Severus. I fear that I handled him all wrong and now I have a Death Eater teaching Potions and Dolores gaining power by the minute. I'm afraid I can't keep the school safe for much longer."

"The whole world isn't going to be safe much longer," Shacklebolt countered grimly.

"At least we have one good thing going for us," Charlie said lightly. "The Ministry and the Death Eaters are splitting their resources looking for Harry Potter and Shadow Snape. We at least know they are one and the same."

"The Weasley Twins left us with some interesting blueprints for magical surveillance, defense, and weapons. Our support group have been producing them in mass and handing them out to the field agents. They have come in handy."

"So..." McGonagall sighed. "Very well. Keep me informed."

"I'm leaving," Shacklebolt voiced. "I'm needed in the Auror department pretty much full-time. I'll
"Good luck. Be safe, my friend." The sentiment was passed back to her and McGonagall placed the crystal carefully back into her dresser. "Where are you Harry?" she whispered and rubbed tiredly at her eyes. There was no answer.

**xXx**

Shadow hurriedly erected the tent while Severus cast passive wards around the clearing they had found in the woods. Icy cold rain and sleet fell like needles from the sky. Shadow's teeth were chattering painfully. He knew his lips must be blue. He ducked into the roomy magical tent and hurried to the small fire pit, quickly casting fire spells and drying charms on his clothes.

Severus entered a moment later. He cast the same charms and moved toward the small kitchenette standing in the back right corner. In minutes, he had tea on. Shadow watched him from his position crouched over the warm fire. He had removed his contact lens earlier - his eye having gone dry and inflamed. He had no idea how eerie he looked at the moment, the fire reflecting brightly in his two-colored eyes, but leaving the rest of his face in shadow.

"You've been disgruntled all day," Severus remarked dryly, bringing over two cups of tea. He offered one to his son, but Shadow shook his head.

"Because this is pointless," Shadow answered, ignoring the offered cup.

Severus set it on the small table between to sofa chairs and took a seat, facing Shadow. "Do enlighten me," he drawled, but he already knew what bothered his son. It was what was bothering him as well.

Shadow rubbed subtly at his chest. His scar had been itching for the past couple days, adding to his anxiety. "You know what," he hissed. "This isn't working. We've been visiting pawnshops all week and we've got nothing! If Sirius and Draco didn't find anything, than we just exhausted the magical pawnshops in England and no one has seen the locket. What are we going to do? Include Muggle pawnshops? Search the world over?"

"We'll do what is necessary," Severus answered, his brown eyes calm, hiding the tension within.

Shadow jumped to his feet, eyes blazing furiously. "We're running out of time! There has to be a better way!"

Severus grit his teeth and stared up at his son. "I'm listening."

"You said the locket was well guarded. You and Sirius were stuck there for almost a day getting past the defenses. Was Regulus such a good wizard? He had to have help, didn't he? Someone must know what he did with the locket. He had to have confided in someone. He knew he could get killed. He must have done something to ensure the locket wouldn't be lost forever. I know I would!"

"We've already thought of such things," Severus snarled, frustrated. "Regulus didn't have friends. He was a loner. And we can't exactly go around the old Death Eaters and ask politely, 'Did you help Regulus commit treason and betray the Dark Lord, oh, fourteen/fifteen years ago?'"

"There has to be a clue left at Grimmauld Place that Sirius missed," Shadow insisted. "This isn't working, Severus! We have to do something else!"

Severus sighed and rubbed at his forehead. "Yes. I agree. Hopefully, Black will have found it."
Shadow raised an eyebrow and took out the small compact. It was glowing faintly. He snapped it open. "Find it?"

"No."

Sirius's voice was small and tinny as it echoed out of the rippling mirror. "I take it you had no luck either."

"No," Shadow answered tightly. "I think we should go back to Grimmauld Place. There has to be a clue that you missed."

Draco's voice joined the conversation. "The Order is there, let's remember."

"Yeah, I know, but we need to search the place!" Shadow snapped.

"I could go. They aren't searching for me like they are you," Sirius offered.

"True, but they will hold you for interrogation." Shadow frowned and began to pace. This was intolerable!

"I believe I will go with him," Severus said, unexpectedly. "Now, in fact. The house will be at its emptiest at night."

Shadow stared at him incredulously. "Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. Learning what they know will be a great benefit to us, and between Black and I, they won't be able to hold us long. Meet me down the street, Black. We'll go in together."

"No, I'll go with Sirius," Draco spoke up. "I'll watch his back and the house will be more open to us since Sirius is Head of the Family and I am the Heir. They'd go crazy if you walked in the door, Professor, but they might let their guard down around me."

Shadow didn't like this plan at all. "I want to look around, too!"

"No. They are correct." Severus placed his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Fine," Shadow gave in reluctantly, glowering at the compact. "But I want you to contact us as often as you can."

"Will do," Sirius said smartly and the compact stopped glowing.

Shadow sighed and put the precious mirror back in his pocket. He rubbed at his face tiredly, barely registering Severus squeezing his shoulder reassuringly. "This wasn't what I had in mind."

"I'm sure not," Severus drawled. "You were in Gryffindor mode and wanted to take all the risks yourself."

Shadow scowled up at him. "Shut up."

Severus smiled and gently led him to the sofa chair. Shadow sat with a huff and let his father pull off his shoes. His feet were swollen and he had two bloody blisters. Severus said nothing. He just stood and went to the trunk at the end of the single bed and returned with healing potions. It turned out walking all day, Apparating all over the place, hiking through secluded areas for four days played hell on your feet, especially in three inch heels.

Once the pain was gone, Shadow sighed and picked up his now cold cup of tea. "I'll make tea," he offered and stood.
Severus let him go, watching him as he bustled around the kitchen. Shadow moved with efficiency and grace while preparing their simple meal. It reminded him painfully of Rose when Shadow began to hum under his breath. His son was probably unaware he was even doing it. It was hard to remain strong and not let any of his doubt through - he felt naked without his long, concealing hair - but it didn't look good. The Dark Lord had supposedly made seven Horcruxes.

The diary, ring, and Demon were eradicated. That left four more, and only two of which they were aware of: Nagini and Slytherin's Locket. All they knew about the remaining two were that they were related to Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw somehow. They had no idea what they were or where to find them, and Severus had no idea how to go about learning these things. It was already January 8th. Shadow was right. They were running out of time. The Dark Lord was only going to grow stronger and more powerful, his reach longer. How was he going to protect his son?

"Severus."

He blinked and met his son's gaze.

"Dinner's ready."

Severus nodded and approached the small kitchen table. He sat in the chair across from Shadow. "Thank you."

Shadow shrugged and bit into his sandwich. Too hungry, tired, and worried for conversation, they ate in silence.

xXx

*Do Not Enter*

*Without the Express Permission of*

*Regulus Arcturus Black*

Draco took a deep breath and raised his wand, "Alohomora." There was a click and Draco slowly pushed the door open just as loud bangs and yells sounded from downstairs. Sirius had been discovered. Of course, that was the plan, for him to be discovered and try and get as much information about the Order's movements and what they knew about the Death Eaters while Draco looked for clues in Regulus' room.

The bedroom was smaller than he expected for the child of the main branch of the powerful and wealthy Black family. Granted they weren't as wealthy as the Malfoy’s, but still… Slytherin colors of emerald and sliver were everywhere, draping the bed, the walls, and the windows. The Black Family crest was painstakingly painted over the bed, along with its motto: Toujours Pur. Beneath this was a collection of yellow newspaper cuttings, all stuck together to make a ragged collage all about Voldemort.

Draco sneered, finding the display crass and naïve. Shaking his head, he moved toward the dresser where there was a single picture framed. It was of Regulus and the Quidditch team. The teenagers stood proudly in crisp Hogwarts robes, the Slytherin crest on each chest. Regulus was sitting in the middle of the front row and grinning the same grin Sirius was famous for. The snitch was flapping wildly in his upraised fist. Seeker, of course he was; Draco sighed.

Draco moved toward the desk over by the grungy window. The drawers were pulled out. One sat on the desk itself and the other one sat on the floor. Papers and quills were strewn about haphazardly.
Obviously Sirius had searched before him and messily at that. He fingered through the mess halfheartedly, his eyes scanning the rest of the room thoughtfully.

A sharp crack sounded behind him and he spun around, his wand extended, heart in his throat. He about cursed when he saw it was only a mangy house elf. His pale skin hung off him in folds and white hair spouted from his bat-like ears while his head remained bald. The rag he wore was filthy, its original use indecipherable.

"What is you doing in my sweet Master's room?" the elf grumbled, eyes glowering sulkily. His voice was grating and deep, as if a bullfrog was trying to talk.

The contemptuous insult and dismissal on Draco's lips froze. Draco narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at the elf. "Your Master was Regulus Black… my dearest uncle?" Draco threw the last bit in as a bid.

The elf perked up at hearing it and eyed Draco thoughtfully. "I sense Black magic in you. Yes. But I don't remember… don't remember sweet Master's nephew…” By the end, the elf looked decidedly distressed, suspicious, and hopeful. His hands wrung around his ears and he twisted in place as if he were in agony.

Draco forced down his disgust. Instead, he forced his features into a haughty, Purebred expression. "My mother, Narcissa Black, has granted me the high honor of welcome within her bloodline instead of my father’s. Sirius Black has accepted me as his Heir."

"Miss Cissy!" the elf exclaimed delighted. "Oh, Miss Cissy a marvelous witch, she is. Mistress always approved of Miss Cissy and Miss Bella! Not that horrid Mudblood lover, Master Sirius! Banished him from the Family, Mistress did! Letting the filthy blood-traitors and filth into Mistress's old house…"

Draco raised an eyebrow at this. "What is your name, elf?"

"Kreacher, sir." The elf practically kissed the floor he bowed so low.

"Kreacher, I want to know more about my uncle. I admire him greatly, but I see that his things have been treated most disgracefully."

"Oh, yes!" Kreacher spat, furious and agonized. Huge tears formed in his filmy eyes as he wrung his hands tightly. "Mundungus Fletcher. Mundungus Fletcher stole my sweet Master's things. Miss Bella's and Miss Cissy's pictures, my Mistress's gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and - and - and the locket! Master Regulus's locket, Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!"

Draco jumped as the elf screamed the last and then his eyes went wide. His heart pumped in his chest hard. The locket! Shadow was right! There was a clue here that Sirius had overlooked! Fingers trembling slightly as adrenaline dumped through his veins, Draco forced his voice level. "Kreacher. Stop."

The elf immediately stopped bashing his head into the floor, leaving a bloody smear. His sobs wracked his slight form and bright green snot dripped steadily from his nose.

"Kreacher, sit up and tell me everything you know about that locket, everything about your orders. Maybe I can help restore the Black honor and return the locket."

The elf sat up and placed his wet face between his knees. He began to rock backward and forward. "Master Regulus had proper pride. For years he talked of the Dark Lord, who was going to bring the
wizards out of hiding to rule the Muggles and the Muggleborns… and when he was sixteen years old, Master Regulus joined the Dark Lord. A year later Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. He always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said… he said… the Dark Lord required an elf."

"Needed an elf?" Draco questioned, wondering what this had to do with the locket.

"It was an honor, said Master Regulus. Kreacher must do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do… and then to c-come home." Kreacher rocked still faster, his breath coming in sobs. "The Dark Lord took Kreacher to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave there was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake…"

Draco felt the blood drain from his face. The Horcrux…

"There was a boat. There was a b-basin of potion on an island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it…" The elf quaked from head to foot. "Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things… Kreacher's insides burned… Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed… He made Kreacher drink all the potion and dropped a locket into the empty basin… He filled it with more potion. Then the Dark Lord sailed away and left Kreacher on the island."

"How did you escape?" Draco asked faintly, feeling decidedly sick. He had never understood how some people could dislike house elves, but now saw clearly the repulsion. The lengths of their obedience was horrific.

Kreacher raised his ugly head and looked at Draco with his great, bloodshot eyes. "Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back."

Draco nodded. He had forgotten. House elves had to obey their Master. It was that simple.

"It was a little while later… Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell… and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord…"

"And he made you drink the potion?" Draco hissed, horrified.

"M-Master Regulus took form his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had," the elf sobbed. "And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets… And he told Kreacher to leave without him! And never… tell what he… had done… but to destroy the first… locket… And he drank… all the potion… and Kreacher swapped the lockets…. And watched as Master… Regulus… was dragged beneath the water… by the cold dead hands in the water…"

Draco couldn't imagine, but he suddenly had sincere respect for his Uncle Regulus. He chose death and defiance to protect his elf and stop the Dark Lord. It was truly remarkable for a boy raised to be dark straight through. "So you brought the locket home and couldn't destroy it."

Kreacher nodded, tears falling small waterfalls around his snout like nose. "Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher failed to obey orders…" The elf broke down into sobs so strong that he wasn't able to speak another word.

Draco's head spun with everything he had been told. He remembered growing up with the casual brutality and cruelty shown the house elf slaves, but never were they tortured like this. It was disgusting to torment a creature so obviously helpless. What was the point? It was pure sadism.
Draco was never more glad to be away from the type of people who thrilled in such acts. Then everything else caught up with him and he growled.

"Mundungus Fletcher stole the locket. You hid it and he took it. Is that right?"

Kretcher nodded wretchedly, still crying.

Draco felt his magic crackle around him. It had a deeper resonance now that he had been adopted into the Black family and he liked the feel of it. "I will find him, Kreacher. I will make him pay."

"Thank you, Master!" The elf wailed, throwing himself at Draco's feet. "Thank you!"

"You did good, Kreacher. Stop punishing yourself. The locket needs special magic to destroy it. I will do so for you. Regulus would be proud of you and wouldn't want you to suffer any longer."

Kreacher howled with tears, but he nodded when Draco asked if he understood.

Driven with purpose, Draco left the room and Kreacher. He stalked carefully through the house and managed to get outside. They had left their tent hidden in an alley. The compact was there. It took almost an hour to explain everything he had learned concerning Kreacher and Regulus. Shadow looked horrified, and Draco realized that Sirius and Severus had faced the same horrors in the cave, and without the aid of any elf.

"Mundungus is crafty. The only places he returns to regularly are pubs and the Order," Severus said. "How is Sirius faring? Will he be able to ask the Order to restrain Mundungus?"

"I don't know," Draco admitted.

"Shadow and I will search likely pubs. You and Sirius try and work it out from that end. Report when you have news."

"Yes, sir." Draco closed the compact and slipped it into his pocket before slinking out of the alley and approaching Grimmauld Place again. He was just reaching the door when he was grabbed from behind. Crying out, he raised his wand, but it was yanked from his grasp. Then everything went black.

xXx

Shadow followed his father into the shady pub. They both wore long black robes with heavy hoods pulled over their heads and shadowing their faces. It was dark inside, the floor so dingy that his shoes stuck. Shadowy figures lined the bar. Half the tables were equally filled. Only one or two of which had their faces uncovered. Severus drifted toward the bar to talk to the barkeep, while Shadow moved toward a corner and scanned the crowd.

This was the third pub since they'd talked to Draco and it was nearing dawn. Shadow had discovered he had a unique skill quite useful. His thoughts had been on Rose lately and it seemed he had retained her ability to read lips. While most of the patrons had their faces covered, the low candle light still illuminated their lips.

… and it cost him almost a hundred galleons.

That's the trouble with delegating. Need to do some things yourself.

What did she do with it?
Didn't have no magic, did it? She threw it into the rubbish. They can always have another.

I heard there were more disappearances on Raven's Craw road and...

Suddenly, Shadow's view of the rest of the pub was obscured as a figure in a dark purple robe stepped in front of him. His hand tightened around his wand as the figure pulled back their hood to reveal a woman in her forties with tight pink skin and pinched, thin lips. Her eyes were a faded hazel and they filled her face.

"Looking for company, sweetheart?" she asked in a soft whisper.

Shadow sneered and turned his face slightly away in dismissal.

The witch chuckled, her voice raspy. She placed her long fingered hands with curling nails flat on the table as she leaned forward. "Such a modest, little man. Don't be afraid," she cooed. "Marigold'll take good care of you."

Heart thumping, Shadow tilted his head back slightly and met the witch's eyes. She gasped as a single blue eye and a single green seemed to glow out from the depths of the shadowed hood. Shadow smiled grimly. Of the four of them, the contacts had bothered him the most. Ironic, since he had wanted them the most, but it seemed that his strange affliction was actually helpful. Without another word, the witch raised her hood and faded deeper into the pub. Severus took her place.

"Are you well?"

He nodded. "What did you find?"

"He's been seen around here three days ago. He was ejected when he began hustling money out of regulars."

"So he won't be back soon," Shadow said with a frustrated sigh.

"That is my opinion as well." Severus gestured briefly with his hand toward the door. "Let's get some sleep. We'll start again when the sun sets."

Shadow wanted to protest. He wanted to keep looking until they found the sleazy thief. The need to get his hands on the damned Horcrux grew everyday, but he felt tired, his eyes were grainy, and he felt lightheaded. He did need to rest. With another sigh, Shadow stood and followed his father across the dark, filthy pub toward the door.

The sky outside was clear, pink and orange surrounding the tops of the buildings. The air was bitterly cold, and the alley was silent. Even still, Shadow never heard the witch coming up behind them. Severus must have sensed something, for he half turned when Shadow felt pain explode in his back. He yelped and gasped, falling hard and curling into a ball.

Severus leapt over his prone form, yelling curses. The pain cut off as if it had never been and Shadow hissed, forcing his muscles to unclench. Shoving himself to his hands and knees, he lifted his sweat-soaked face. Severus was standing over an old witch. She lay sprawled, unconscious, blood trickling from her mouth and nose.

Shadow stood on shaking legs, quickly brushing at his eyes. "What the hell was that?"

"Agonis spintus," Severus answered grimly. He gently clasped his son's shoulder and quickly led him down the alley. Finding a secluded nook, he was about to Apparate them away when Shadow jerked out of his grip.
"Wait," he called. He ran five feet to a paper stand that had magically filled a second ago. He reached inside and yanked a paper out before returning to Severus. They Apparated into the small clearing where their tent stood. Shadow stepped away from his father and stared down at the front page.

**A Dark Ultimatum**

Under the ominous headline, a gruesome picture of a white, blood-spattered wall filled half the page. A corpse sat slumped against the wall in the right corner and, if you looked closely, you could see its dead lips moving. Feeling cold, Shadow quickly read the article. It seemed that Igor Karkaroff walked into the Minister's office claiming he wanted to turn on the Dark Lord only to explode all over the Minister. A dormant spell then activated, animating his corpse to pass along the Dark Lord's message:

*Step down and acknowledge Lord Voldemort as the Wizarding World's rightful ruler or go to War.*

Fudge had been ordered to print his answer in Monday morning's paper. It was Saturday morning now. The war started in two days. Shadow lifted his head and handed the paper over. Severus read it avidly. Shadow turned and sat heavily, putting his head in his hands.

**xXx**

Draco opened his eyes only to squeeze them shut again. Bright light pierced through his lids and he groaned as it irritated his already pounding head.

"Welcome back, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco gasped and desperately tried to see who was with him. It was hard, considering he was laying flat on his back with his ankles, wrists, and neck strapped down to a small wooden table. A shadowy figure moved through the bright light and he squinted hard, his wrists rolling as he checked the give of his bindings. Depressingly, there was none. How could he be so stupid? He'd been captured!

"I think it's time we had a little talk."

Wait. He knew that voice. Lifting his head as far as he could, he peered through the light and caught sight of red hair. "Great," he muttered and let his head fall back heavily. It was Charlie Weasley, one of the Order Triad. He felt the sheer terror that had sent his heart racing fade. His muscles quivered as the adrenaline left his system. At least it wasn't Death Eaters. "Actually, I'm not a Malfoy anymore. Got disinherited and disowned. I'm Draco Black, Sirius Black's Heir," he informed him and settled in for a very long, very tedious few days.

**xXx**

Shadow leaned heavily against the bathroom counter, his elbows locked and his head hanging. Cold water dripped down his face and glistened in his straight brown hair. Gritting his teeth, Shadow lifted his eyes to the supposedly innocent plane of glass.

"Leave me the fuck alone," he growled lowly at his reflection. "I'm not letting you Out. You hear me, Seraphim?" The dull ache in his curse scar continued to throb and Shadow bared his teeth.

"Shadow?"
The teen spun to face the door. Heart pounding, he cleared his throat and called out, "I'm almost done. Be right there." Hearing his father move off, Shadow turned back and splashed his face once more, grabbed up his baggy jacket, and pulled it on without looking back into the mirror's depths.

Severus was waiting in the sitting room. He wore his hooded robe and looked impatient to leave. They had been looking for Mundungus for four days now and still no sign of him. Fudge had declared war on the Dark Lord (We Won't Be Ruled By Terror, Monday’s headline had read), Draco and Sirius had been released from interrogation and were now working with the Order, and Severus and he were still stalking the shadier areas of the Wizarding World keeping their eyes and ears open for anything useful.

Rubbing at his chest, Shadow followed his father outside and pulled up the hood of the robe he wore under his jacket. Severus grabbed his arm and they Apparated to the ghetto in Somerset. It was dark, a few hours short of midnight. Witches with long scraggily hair stood in dark doorways holding smoking potions, murmuring about the dark brews for sale inside. Prettier witches and a few young wizards stood under street lights, opening their robes seductively to reveal the lingerie they wore underneath.

Cloaked pedestrians walked purposefully down the street, some stopping to examine the products on display. A few boarded up buildings throbbed with music; others had colorful smoke seeping out cracks in the wood. Severus had explained that those were drug houses. It was amazing that the Wizarding world reflected the Muggle one so closely, but on the other hand, Shadow wasn't really that surprised. People were people. Magic wouldn't prevent the indulgence of human vices.

Severus found the pub he was searching for and approached the entrance. The two large men standing on either side of the door let him pass but stepped in front of Shadow before the teen could follow.

Jumbo sneered, his little beady eyes glittering in the gloom. "Sorry, mate, there's a height requirement."

The other bouncer snickered at his companions effort at wit.

Shadow grinned mirthlessly and slammed Jumbo through the doorway with a massive shove of wandless magic. The muscle-head skidded along the filthy floor several feet. The pub grew silent as every hooded head turned. Shadow stepped into that space and walked calmly across the room toward the bar. He leaned against the dark wood insolently and attention quickly drifted away, the soft murmur of voices returning.

"What can I get ya?" the barkeep asked dully.

"Firewhisky," Shadow rapped, keeping his voice low.

A shot glass appeared before him filled with amber liquid and the barkeep returned to Severus. Shadow took his drink and turned to face the rest of the pub, leaning back against the bar. His hand twitched, wanting to rub at his throbbing scar, but he kept it still. His fingers tightened against his glass and he wondered if the alcohol would help or hinder. Either way, he didn't think a crowded pub was the place to find out.

"I heard the count was up to twelve dead."

Without shifting his body language or moving his head, his attention focused on the two wizards sitting two stools down from him. Neither had their hood up, meaning they were either newbies to the underground or they were tough shit.
"It must have taken serious magic to take out a bridge that size."

"It disrupted Muggle traffic and the area's economy. I heard the Muggle Minister isn't happy."

"What's he going to do?" the man sneered and drank half his drink. "He's a Muggle."

"I don't know," the other man muttered and said something too quietly to hear. Shadow turned his head just enough to be able to read his lips. *There's rumors going around that Muggles got weapons that could destroy cities, even Wizarding ones.*

"Ha! Yeah, right!"

Severus went past, silent and graceful. Shadow set his untouched drink back on the bar and followed him. Once they were back outside, Shadow picked up his pace and came even with his father. "There was an attack?"


"Great," Shadow muttered and fell back, eyes scanning the dark street for trouble. He wasn't about to be ambushed by a crazy hag ever again.

xXx

Neville looked down the hallway, and seeing no one, he hurried across and knocked on Remus's door. His mentor opened it with a welcome smile and gestured the Gryffindor into his quarters. Neville felt his muscles relax as he settled onto his comfortable couch.

"Still feeling watched?" Remus asked in concern, settling next to the haggard looking teen.

"Everywhere I go, I feel like someone is staring right at me, but I can't catch anyone doing it!" Neville exclaimed tiredly, rubbing at his face. "I tell myself no one's there, but I can't shake the feeling, either."

"I don't know what's going on, but you should trust your instincts," Remus told him solemnly. The idea of someone hunting his cub made him want to growl. It didn't help that the full moon was in two days.

Neville glanced into Remus's now wolf-gold eyes and frowned. "How are you going to hide your condition?"

"Sirius revealed himself to the Order and they accepted him back into their ranks. The Headmistress is allowing him to impersonate me again."

"Did he tell them where Shadow and Professor Snape are?"

"No. He told them they went off on their own, trusting nobody. It's not so unbelievable for Professor Snape to do such a thing," Remus smiled wryly, his eyes darkening to brown once more. "They questioned Draco more vigorously than they did Sirius, actually. It's not so far fetched for Siri to be clueless, but they expected Draco to know what's happening around him. They wanted to know everything they could about Shadow's transformation, his adoption, and any future plans they had made."

Neville frowned. "What'd he say?"

"Basically that the Dark Lord cast a spell on Shadow and forced him to attack St Mungo's, but that
Severus was able to remove it. The rest he wasn't informed about and didn't push since he was trying to prove his loyalty."

"That's good."

Remus squeezed his shoulder. "How about you? How's the DA going?"

"I haven't been able to go. I'm afraid whoever's watching me will find everyone, but I help Ginny and Hermione think of activities and lessons. More people join every week. We have almost fifty members now."

"That's amazing, Nev. You kids are really inspiring."

Neville blushed.

Remus rose and went to his kitchenette. He poured them some pumpkin juice. "So how are you and Ginny?"

Neville blushed harder. "She's really amazing in the DA. She's determined to prove herself, I think. It's really brave."

"So are you," Remus said gently as he handed the teen a mug. "You're doing a great job, Nev."

Neville smiled back and reached into his bag. He pulled out a book and some scrolls. "Umbridge is stalking the twins, looking for any excuse to get rid of them, so they haven't been able to go to DA, either. We meet in different classrooms to plan pranks and think of things that could help the Order members. We have a couple ideas we're working on right now."

Remus laughed. "I can't wait to see what you guys have come up with. It almost makes me feel sorry for the enemy."

"Hardly." Neville laughed and opened his book. "I was wondering if you could help me with my Transfiguration essay."

"Of course." Remus smiled and pulled the book closer to him, feeling content to have his cub with him and safe. Despite the full moon being so close, his wolf was calm and quiet now that he had one of his pack with him.

Neville saw the tension lines in his mentor's face ease and smiled warmly.

xXx

A few hours later, in their third pub, Shadow felt the compact in his pocket buzz. He caught his father's eye and tilted his head toward the door. Severus blinked in acknowledgement and Shadow slipped outside into a dark nook. Flipping the small mirror open, Draco's smooth tones drifted up to him.

"Have you heard about the attack?"

"The bridge?"

"Yeah. The Muggle Minister's in a panic. Shacklebolt has been assigned to guard him full-time and to help him keep the Muggle public calm. He won't be able to return to HQ for a while."

"Any word on Mundungus?"
"Still nothing. Weasley insists that it isn't that unusual for Mundungus to disappear for weeks at a time. He was never a fully trusted member of the Order, but they kept him around because he could occasionally slip them some good information or get them things with his shady contacts."

Shadow barely heard what Draco was saying. The consistent throbbing in the lightning scar over his heart had become ignorable, but now it suddenly flared up, burning hot with a vengeance. Darkness tunneled his vision. He was falling… The compact dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"Shadow? What's wrong? Shadow!"

"Inhi - " He gasped as pain exploded behind his eyes. " - bitum!"

Seraphim fell to his knees and blinked his eyes clear. He found himself in a dark corner between two buildings on an unfamiliar street. It was night. He was outside. He was alone. The jacket held his arms crossed over his chest snugly. He tugged experimentally, but the bindings held. He smiled, reassured that at least that hadn’t changed.

A dull pain throbbed up from his knee, and he looked down to see broken glass and bent metal. Seraphim frowned and stood, reaching for the sparkly magic. The wound instantly disappeared. Satisfied, he turned his attention to the area around him. There were a lot of people wandering around, all of them concealed in the shadows and wearing cloaks. Feeling a bit nervous, Seraphim slunk away, looking for somewhere less populated.

Not ten minutes later, Severus left the pub and called out for Shadow. Getting no response, Severus hurried over to the nearest shadowed corner, figuring that was where his son would have gone to answer the call. His boot crunched on something. "Lumos," he whispered. Soft light gently revealed the shattered compact. Severus jumped to his feet, quickly scanning the street, but his son was nowhere to be seen.

xXx

Seraphim had no idea how long he had been gone. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep in a chair in that Chamber Draco had wanted to visit. Draco and the dark-haired man had been working on a big creature for a long time. It irritated him that his Other had taken over. He was going to keep the Other away so that he could protect them. Seraphim would make sure they never hurt again.

He walked for a long time, steadily leaving the busy streets behind. Eventually, he found himself in a residential neighborhood. Here, it was silent, everyone asleep in their homes. Seraphim felt good to be back. The air was cool, but he was warm in his jacket. He was alone on the street and there was no one here who could hurt him.

His magic pulsed through his blood. He could feel it and smiled happily that he wasn't helpless even without his knife. The only thing he needed for everything to be perfect was a place to stay. He couldn't stay out in the open. The sun was coming. The sky was already lightening to a soft blue-grey.

Where was Draco? He frowned at the thought. Was he safe? Draco wasn't Boy anymore and could fight, but Seraphim had promised to protect him. He had the ring on his finger. It had always taken him to Draco before, but he couldn't use it with his arms securely tied around him.

Pondering the situation, Seraphim walked slowly up to a small house with a sign in the yard. Unlike all the other houses, there wasn't a car in the driveway. The sun had painted the sky pink and orange, the dew on the grassy lawns sparkled in the light. He could hear people moving around as lights
came on in windows. The world was waking. Taking a chance, Seraphim walked up to the front window of the house that was different from the others and looked in. There was no furniture. It was empty. Smiling happily, Seraphim quickly went to the front door and used magic to throw it open and then closed behind him.

xXx

Severus watched all this from across the street, spelled to be unnoticeable. The dour Potions Master considered he may owe his son an apology. He had persistently tried to convince Shadow that the jacket wasn't necessary, afraid it would make Shadow doubt his self-worth and sanity, but the bracelet he wore that was connected to the jacket had worked perfectly, allowing him to keep track of Seraphim. Confident that his son would stay put, Severus walked far enough away not to be overheard by Muggles and Apparated to London.

He appeared a few houses down from Grimmauld Place. Taking a deep breath, he settled against the wall and closed his eyes. Reaching carefully, he searched for a familiar mind. He had known Sirius Black since he was eleven years old. He had been tormented by him and hurt him in return. Severus hated him with an obsessive passion, hated him even when he was put away in Azkaban, hated him when he escaped. He'd been forced to push aside that hatred by circumstance, but the connection forged by such passionate energy was still there between them.

Black, you abysmal mutt, Hear Me!

Shock, recognition, understanding, and then finally repulsion slid across Severus's open mind in answer. Black's mind was chaotic, spiking in bright spurts, eddying sullenly in between. Words, flavors, images flashed by even as the mangy cur tried to force him out of his mind.

Send Draco out! he ordered, fighting against that push. Send Draco outside!

Gasping, Severus slumped against the wall, his magic dangerously spent. With sharp movements, he pulled out a rejuvenation potion and quickly downed the contents. Then he folded his arms and waited, eyes pinned on the space where Grimmauld Place invisibly stood. Five minuets, then ten. Severus stood perfectly still, patient as a poisonous spider.

xXx

"Gah!" Sirius staggered and practically face-planted into the breakfast Molly Weasley had set in front of him.

Draco grabbed his shoulder and helped keep him sitting upright. His eyes darted to the Order members watching suspiciously.

"Is he all right?" Emmeline Vance asked primly.

"I'm sure he's fine," Draco answered casually. He brushed black bangs from his eyes and surreptitiously studied Sirius's face. The man looked very ill. "Maybe he needs to lie down for a moment. I'll help him to his room."

Sirius came obediently, head hanging and hands pale as they gripped Draco's shoulder for support. They walked carefully upstairs, Emmeline following and watching them ascend with a frown. Draco smiled politely and tossed a wave over his shoulder as they made it to the top. He hurried Sirius down the hallway and out from under her watchful gaze.

"What happened?"
"Damn him, the slimy grease ball! Snivellus did that on purpose," Sirius muttered as Draco helped him sit on the edge of the bed.

"Severus!" Draco said sharply. He grabbed Sirius hard by the shoulders. "Did he contact you? Did he say something about Shadow?"

"Draaaccceoo," Sirius whined, clutching his head.

The Slytherin gritted his teeth and forced his voice softer. After spending a week alone with the man, camping and searching for Mundungus, and another handful of days with him trying to dance around the Order's questions, he had come to know Sirius much better. There was no hurrying the prankster when he didn't want to be hurried, but if he could get him to talk about himself, maybe he'd get the information faster.

"What happened, Sirius? Are you okay?" he asked, all sympathy.

"Bloody bastard broke into my head! Can't use the compact like a normal person, oh no!"

"He must have thought you needed to know something quick," Draco murmured and reached to help massage Sirius's temples. The Animagus sighed in pleasure and his shoulders relaxed.

"Didn't tell me nothing," Sirius argued, but then his eyes furrowed in thought. "But maybe you should go outside."

"What?" Draco knelt and held his eyes. "What do you mean? We're not allowed to leave Grimmauld Place."

"I just… have a strange feeling that you need to go outside."

"Interesting."

Draco spun and jumped to his feet, placing himself protectively in front of the injured Sirius. The man may drive him crazy sometimes, but Sirius had helped him through the first shock of his grief, supported him, and promised to ensure his mother's name would be remembered in the Black Family Chronicles. Even better, Sirius swore to help him avenger her death. Draco was his Heir and he would not dishonor that duty.

"Relax," Charlie said with an almost Slytherin smile. "I'm not the enemy."

Draco sneered and kept his hand close to his wand pocket.

"I suspect Severus just contacted you."

"Now's really not the time, Charlie," Sirius snapped behind him. "My head's gonna explode."

The redhead smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that." His blue eyes found and held Draco's. "You are needed, I presume?"

"What if I were?" Draco asked lowly, heart pounding.

"I'd say that's the first good news we've gotten in days," Charlie answered. "We have no way to contact Severus ourselves, and when you proved not to be able to contact him either, we were really disappointed. The war has begun and we're all on the same side. Tell Severus that he is welcome to come back and we will do our best to protect his son, the Boy-Who-Lived."

Draco eyed the older man. "I'll tell him."
"Good." Charlie stepped out of the doorway and gestured behind him. "You're free to go. I'll take care of Sirius."

Draco nodded and quickly moved past him. He was down the stairs and out the front door in less than two minutes. He walked quickly down the street, wondering what he was supposed to do now when suddenly he was grabbed and Apparated away. Stumbling as his feet hit the ground once more, he spun with his wand ready.

"A little late for that, don't you think?" Severus drawled, eyes glittering with amusement.

"Bloody hell, Severus, what's going on?" Draco demanded, shoving his wand back into his robes. He didn't wait for his answer, though. Taking a deep breath, he quickly reported. "Charlie Weasley asked me to tell you that he wants to be allies, all past deeds forgotten. He's desperate to find you and Shadow."

"I'll consider the matter," Severus said and waved that issue away. "Seraphim has risen to the surface and is staying in that empty house. I want you to keep your eye on him."

Draco nodded and didn't waste time with any more questions. He quickly crossed the street and knocked on the door, eyes glancing up and down the street to make sure no one saw him. "Seph! It's me, Draco! Open up!"

The door opened under his hand and he quickly entered the dim house. Seraphim stood in the hallway, breathing fast. Draco had obviously scared him. Shutting the door, Draco kept his empty hands in sight. "I'm sorry. It's just me."

"Look different," Seraphim growled, green eyes smoldering angrily.

"I'm hiding so people don't recognize me," Draco explained quickly. He hoped he hadn't just lost the alter's hard-won trust, so he decided to play it up. "I was really scared."

Seraphim immediately softened and strode over to him, offering comfort with his presence. "I'm here. I'll protect you."

Draco smiled brightly at the alter and was pleased to see Seraphim smile back.

xXx

It was now almost midnight. Draco was about ready to throw in the towel. Seraphim held his sympathies, but he was very boring company. Right now, Seraphim was staring out the window at the night. If he wasn't doing that, he was wandering around the house, making sure the windows and doors were shut and locked, or humoring Draco by playing hide and seek. Not that that wasn't hard considering they didn't have furniture or anything to hide behind. Basically, they just looked in rooms and closets until they found the right one.

"Seph, I'm hungry," he finally voiced. He hadn't said anything until now because he was afraid of what Seraphim would do with the information, but he couldn't stay silent any longer. His breakfast had been interrupted and he'd spent the whole day without food. At least they had water from the facets.

"I'm hungry, too," Seraphim admitted, turning to look at Draco. "No food here."

Draco sighed. "I could go get some."

"From a person." Seraphim frowned. Draco and the dark-haired man had told him several times that
he couldn't live by himself. He needed people for shelter and, he realized, food as well. It wasn't something he was too happy about. "I go."

"We'll go together, but let's try to not make trouble. Follow my lead, please."

Seraphim considered that and eventually nodded. He didn't want trouble either.

The two left the house and started down the street. Draco had taken off his robes and spelled Seraphim's off as well without removing the black straight-jacket. Seph was left standing in Muggle jeans and sneakers. Draco wore something more acceptable: black slacks and a silk, long-sleeved, dark green T-shirt.

Fog moved slowly over the ground and Draco shivered, surreptitiously casting a warming charm on his chest. They walked only a few blocks before they reached a commercial street. Most of the stores and restaurants were closed, but Draco caught sight of a gas station still lit up. He headed that way with Seraphim a few steps behind him, his green eyes bright and watchful. The convenience store was empty except for the young man standing behind the counter, reading a magazine. Draco hurried down the food aisle and grabbed a loaf of bread, chips, and other such things. He quickly had more than he could carry.

"Seph," he said and turned to look for his friend.

The cashier was staring at Seraphim, apprehension clear on his face as the alter stared back, eyes smoldering and arms wrapped up. He looked dangerous and clearly pleased as he took in the Muggle's fear, which only made the man more afraid.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Seph, come on. I want to get out of here."

Seraphim turned and practically strutted back toward Draco. Draco couldn't help but think it was cute. He gestured Seraphim closer and made him push his arms out as far as they could go - which was only an inch or so. He quickly put some things in the makeshift pouch and used his free hand to grab milk and orange juice.

The cashier quickly rang them up, sweat dewing on his forehead. Draco paid with the little bit of Muggle money he had leftover from when he and Sirius had been searching for the damn locket. He hooked two of the plastic bags on his left arm and grabbed the third with his free hand. Seraphim followed him out happily. Draco stopped as soon as they were out of sight and shrunk the bags.

"You have bigger pockets. I don't want the bread smashed," Draco explained as he put the now inch tall bags into the alter's roomy jacket pockets.

Seraphim huffed a breathy laugh, thrilled that he had met a stranger and hadn't been attacked or forced to defend himself.

"What do we have here? Two kiddies out for walk? Isn't it past your bedtime?"

Seraphim whirled and watched as four older teenagers stepped out of the shadows. They wore black and had sliver chains for belts and hanging from their pockets. Silver glinted in their lips and eyebrows. Dark makeup lined their eyes and their hair was spiked, the tips pink and blue. Seraphim felt his magic rise around him, pushing at the ten-foot limit, but unable to go past it.

"Whoa." The leer on the leader's face turned into awe. "Nice look, mate."

"Sweet contacts," another said.
Draco pulled his hand out of his pocket, leaving his wand hidden. "He appreciates it, I'm sure," he drawled. "Sorry, but we're running late. Come on, Seph."

Glowering, eyes glimmering malevolently, Seraphim backed away, following the sound of Draco's boots on the pavement. The gang of gothic teens let them go, laughing and saluting them. Despite the good outcome, Seraphim was a bit shaken. He turned and hurried Draco along, and they practically jogged back to the house.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked softly, once they were safe inside the kitchen of their hideaway.

Seraphim met his eyes and admitted in a small voice, "I was scared."

"Seph." He moved over to his friend's side and gently leaned against his shoulder. Touching had never been a comfort to the alter, so Draco knew better than to wrap his arm around him. Seraphim trembled faintly, but he slowly leaned his weight into Draco. "It'll be okay. I'll look after you, just the way you look after me. Together, okay?"

Ducking his head, Seraphim closed his eyes as they filled with tears. "Together," he whispered, feeling that strange warm feeling in his chest he only ever felt around Draco. He hugged himself within his jacket and straightened, pushing Draco away with magic. "Let's eat now. I'm still hungry."

"Okay." Draco smiled and cheerfully showed the damaged alter how to make sandwiches. Seraphim watched and clumsily followed his example with wandless magic. They made a mess, but eventually they had two sandwiches and ate them happily. Seraphim even smiled.

xXx

Fudge looked at the pile of reports stacked on his desk, all of them flagged red as emergencies. It was Thursday, the week almost blessedly over, but it looked like all concepts of normal business hours was about to go out the window. Amelia Bones, Head of Magical Law Enforcement had been killed. No, it was worse than killed. She'd been dismembered and displayed as a deterrent to anyone who went against the Dark Lord.

Now the Aurors were reporting directly to him and he had a reports by the stacks of people saying their young adult children, nieces, and nephews were missing. Business owners were complaining that Death Eaters were marching into their shops and demanding money or else their shops would be destroyed. Everyone was clambering for protection. The papers were beginning to demand Harry Potter. Fudge had said he had him hiding away in training, but that wasn't going to hold much longer.

He was up to his neck in trouble and had absolutely no idea what to do about it. Dropping his head in his hands, he felt like weeping. Without Potter and without the blasted Snapes, he was quickly running out of options. There was only one place left he could turn. He closed his eyes and summoned his secretary.

"Yes, Minister?" the young girl asked, flustered and about as exhausted as Fudge was himself.

"Get me an owl. I need to write Headmistress McGonagall."

Chapter end.
Becoming

Remus fell tiredly into his office chair. He'd been forced to maintain a healthy façade for his classes, but now that he was alone he let the strain rise to the surface. Thank Merlin classes were over, at least until Monday. A soft knock on the door had him lifting his head off the back of his chair. He considered getting up to open it, but dismissed the idea.

"Come in," he called instead.

Headmistress Vector stepped into the room with a mangy black dog trotting at her heels. "Is there anything I can do for you, Professor?" she asked softly, her eyes compassionate and knowing.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine," Remus assured her with a smile.

Vector nodded and slipped quietly out of the room.

Sirius waited for the door to shut before transforming. He grinned at his old friend. "How are you holding up, Moony?"

"I'm getting old," Remus admitted.

"Nonsense." Sirius clasped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I believe Tonks is anxiously waiting for your arrival. I'm sure she can help you feel young again."

"Sirius!" Remus scolded, face burning hot.

Sirius laughed. "Anything I should know about here?"

"Keep an eye on Neville, please. Someone's been stalking him." Remus straightened his vest and stood. "What about you? What's been going on?"

"Draco figured out Mundungus stole the locket. Snape and the Order are looking for him, and I'm pretty sure Draco and Shadow are with Snape." Sirius handed him a woolen hat with an evil grin. "Say hello to Nymphadora for me."

The portkey activated before Remus could retort. He landed heavily in the sitting room of Grimmauld Place. As Sirius had warned him, Tonks was waiting. She jumped to her feet and almost tripped over them in her attempt to catch him as Remus staggered. They leaned on each other, trying to keep from falling. Tonks smiled up at him through vibrant yellow hair. Despite his fatigue, Remus felt happiness stir at the sight.

"How are you?" he asked softly, raising a hand to gently caress her cheek.

She leaned into the gesture, her eyes a bright blue. "I'm perfect. The Minister contacted Minerva last night. He's passing us the most urgent DE sightings so we can help take the burden off the Aurors. We busted two DE's this morning hustling a shopkeeper. Dropped them trussed up at the Ministry's doorstep. The Aurors were pleased."

Remus moved them back toward the couch and sat down, pulling her into his side and kissing her lips softly. "You weren't hurt?"
"Nah! Just a little scratch. Emmeline healed me in minutes," Tonks reassured him.

"Did you get any information off them?"

"Well…" Tonks blushed and her hair lengthened and dropped down her back, a dark orange. "Not the kind you'd think. They know nothing of the more serious DE's. Seems like You-Know-Who is recruiting lackeys. Their only purpose is to get money and gather even more recruits. They don't know anything about any real plans and haven't even seen You-Know-Who personally."

"So what did you learn?" Remus asked. Seeing her nervousness, he grabbed her hands in his.

"Tonks? What is it?"

"Well, I found something out when Emmy fixed my scratch."

"What?" Remus sat rigidly, his eyes gold with terror. "Did I pass the disease to you?"

"No!" Tonks threw her arms around him. "No. Stop that. I'm fine. I swear it."

Remus held her tightly, hands shaking. "Then what, Tonks? Just tell me."

She pulled away and looked into his eyes. "We're pregnant."

"What!" Remus leapt to his feet, almost spilling her to the floor. "Impossible! We were careful!"

"Emmeline thinks you're just extra potent, so the normal precautions weren't enough," Tonks offered, hair darkening to brown and was quickly headed into black. Her eyes turned a muddy hazel and filled with tears. "Don't be angry, Remy."

"Merlin." Remus sank to his knees and ran his hands ruggedly through his hair, making it stand almost on end. "I'm not angry, I'm just shocked… I love you, Tonks. More than you'll ever know."

Tonks grinned and flung herself at her love. Laughing, crying, she kissed his face over and over again until Remus finally relaxed and returned her embrace.

"A baby…" he repeated faintly. Shaking his head, he buried his face in her soft, spiky yellow hair. "I don't deserve you."

"Guess you can't keep turning down my proposal now, can you?" Her eyes sparkled as Remus blushed. "So, want to help me pick a date?"

xXx

Draco and Seraphim left the house at dusk to go for a walk. The alter hated these at first, but Draco convinced him that he needed to get out for a little bit. They had been living in the empty house since Wednesday with nothing to do and Draco was finding boredom deadly. It gave him too much time to think; about his childhood, about his mother, about the war, about their uncertain survival. Within hours, he'd grown anxious. After four days, he was practically twitching. He'd suggested walks almost desperately.

Since it was Saturday, there were more people out than on their previous walks. A few kids were still playing ball in one yard. A man was washing his car in another. Seraphim walked stiffly beside him, eyeing these people, but he was relatively calm. He was trusting more and more to the power of the jacket to keep people away from him. Draco smiled wryly as the Muggles walking with their dogs crossed to the other side of the street just to avoid the skinny, creepy kid in the straitjacket.
"It's going to warm up soon," Draco said softly, tired of the silence.

Seraphim glanced over at him and then away again when nothing else was said.

"February is only two weeks away. Spring is right around the corner," Draco continued, shoving his hands in his pocket, daydreaming about a hot summer sun. It was still bitterly cold and he had no Muggle jacket. That left him in only his T-shirt. Thank Merlin for warming charms. "It's winter right now."

Seraphim frowned but looked more interested.

"It's the month of January. There are twelve months in the year and four seasons: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Spring and Summer are warm. The sun shines and it gets hot."

"How far?" Seraphim asked curiously, his green eyes wide as he considered this.

"Well, Spring starts at the end of March. January, February, March… so only two more months."

They turned the corner and approached a small park. There were about seven kids playing with three adults watching from the side. Draco and Seraphim walked toward the swings. The kids hustled out of their way. The parents were too uncomfortable to voice their displeasure. Seraphim sat in the swing and rocked gently, his feet never leaving the ground. Draco sat still beside him.

"How many days?" the alter asked suddenly.

"Sixty, I suppose." Draco shrugged. "Why?"

Seraphim sighed and looked up into the rapidly darkening sky. "It's good to be warm."

Draco smiled, his violet eyes sparkling. "Yeah. Yeah, it is."

Seraphim glanced over at him and smiled before shoving with his magic. Draco was well within ten feet and his swing moved forward quickly. Draco laughed, making a grab for the chains and let Seraphim push him on the swing. It was a very strange sensation. There was nothing like swings in the Wizarding world. It reminded him vaguely of flying, but at the same time it was very different. Every time he came down, his stomach felt light and tickly, and after a while he began to feel almost sleepy despite the speed, which he never felt on a broom.

"Don't you want to try it, Seph? It's really fun!" Draco called as he swung past.

Seraphim didn't answer, he just smiled contentedly, feeling warm and happy knowing he was taking good care of Draco.

"Come on, please? I want you to try it." Draco was determined to get his way. "If you don't like it, you can always stop."

Seraphim tilted his head, considering the proposition. Draco's swinging slowly stopped as the alter refrained from applying magic. Finally, Seraphim nodded. "I'll try."

Draco grinned. "Okay. Copy me. Stick your legs out and lean back, then pull them in and lean forward."

The two teenagers pumped steadily, their legs in synch. Slowly they began to swing higher and faster. Seraphim gripped the chain tightly with his magic, fear in his eyes, but Draco could also see a childlike excitement growing as the falling sensation got stronger and stronger. Soon, they were as
high as the swing would let them go and both were grinning ear to ear. Draco whooped and laughed out loud, suddenly struck with the memory of flying in the snow with Shadow. He looked over at Seraphim and found the alter huffing, emerald eyes twinkling with pure joy. It was a beautiful sight.

**xXx**

As they were walking home, Seraphim noticed the red welts on Draco's hands from holding the chains on the swing. He quickly used his White magic - at least that's what Draco told him was its name - to heal it. Normal people had light or dark magic, but Seraphim was special. He had White magic and Black magic. The memory of Draco telling him he was very special still made him smile.

Draco thanked him for fixing his hands and Seraphim sighed happily. Content, they went to the kitchen to make dinner. Seraphim had never been so happy. The first few days in the house had been nice, but since they started walking, playing, and talking more, Seraphim realized his days now had something special about them that was very warm and nice. He had never smiled so much in his life or been outside so many times. It was kind of scary, but Seraphim would look at Draco and know that it was okay. He'd tell himself - *I'm okay, it's okay* - and it would be fun again and the fear would go away.

"What's the matter?" Draco asked softly.

"Nothing," Seraphim whispered and lifted the sandwich with magic for a bite.

He was a little confused because nothing was wrong. He was finally winning. The pain was gone, but it also felt like it couldn't stay this way. It felt a little unreal. Something… bad… was going to happen. He shook his head hard and walked away from the table, leaving his sandwich behind despite his hunger. He moved toward the window and looked out on the silent, foggy night.

Nothing bad was going to happen because he wouldn't let it. But… bad things always happened, didn't they? But he was hidden, and Draco was with him, and they were alone, and it was good. It was all very nice and warm, just like he had been saying to himself. He didn't want to be scared. He had nothing to be scared of. So why was he shifting his feet anxiously? Why was his heart going faster and faster?

"Draco?" he whispered, feeling unsure and needing reassurance. He hadn't asked for help in a long, long time. He didn't want to ask for help. The last time he asked for help he got hurt more for it. Uncle liked to listen to him beg. But… Draco wouldn't hurt him. He wouldn't!

Wincing away from the memories, he turned and looked behind him to see Draco already standing near him, his expression worried. That made Seraphim feel worse. He was supposed to take care of him. Things were good and he was making things bad again. Why would he do that? He was baffled and growing more afraid.

"Seph? What's wrong?" Draco entreated. His hand reached forward, making Seraphim flinch involuntarily. The hand fell back without making contact. "Hey. It's okay. Talk to me. What's happening?"

"Don't know, don't know, don't know…" Seraphim muttered. He slid down the wall and let his magic whip around him, but there was nothing to fight. He didn't understand. He didn't understand! He didn't understand!

Draco crouched before him, his mouth open to say something, but right then, it happened. Pain. Pain came over him, from inside him. Seraphim yelped, startled, and pressed his White magic into his body, trying to fight it. Was it the Other him? Was he doing this? Why? Why would the Other him hurt them? It didn't make any sense.
The pain grew and, as it did, his hold on the White magic slipped from his fingers. He couldn't touch it anymore. He looked desperately up at Draco. He was saying something, his mouth moving quickly, but Seraphim couldn't hear him past the roaring in his ears. It hurt so much! He tilted his face back, sweat rolling down his neck, and screamed, helpless and terrified.

And then… Then he was swallowed by the Black…

… Throbbing, pulsing, the pain slid away from him as the Black shadows lifted away and back. They trembled behind him, above him, ready to strike. Smells filled every breath, telling him he was in his nest. Other smells, mostly of the smaller male who was there, against the wall. Fear - it was always fear - rose off his nest-sib like invisible smoke, as if he were still Boy and not a not-Boy now. He cooed soothingly.

In our nest, safe. Pain gone.

The Black stilled and lay flat against his back and down past his wings, brushing over the tender spots among the glossy feathers. The smell of dried blood and old pain reached his nose. He ignored it and moved forward on knuckles and the balls of his feet, still cooing. The smaller male's fear dissipated as he dragged a wing forward to brush his arm with a wing feather.

Yes, good, no fear here. Safe in nest.

His nest-sib sank down to his heels and met his gaze, but he looked away as the slightest movement of the curtain drew his attention. The Black rose, poised to strike. No scent but cold and not-fog filled his nose as he took a deep, scenting breath. There were no prey or predators close. Though predators weren't far. The not-fog was filled with the scent of them. Maybe they should move their nest to clear territory?

He moved toward the window and sniffed at the night, trying to determine how far away the predators were. Yes. More than one, a dozen or more, but miles away. This was their hunting area. He tilted his head, the Black shadows writhing in thought behind him, his wings ruffling with his agitation. He liked this nest, but he'd prefer empty hunting ground, his own territory.

His nest-sib was making chattering-noise - had been chattering, he realized - and he glanced back at him curiously. The smaller male was still crouched, slight fear and strong anxiety sharpening his scent. Was he worried about the predators, too? He growled. No one would touch his nest-sib. He flared his wings, purposefully spreading his musk and scent, the Black flared around his head, rubbing against the walls and ceiling.

The smaller male froze and the fear-smell grew stinging sharply. He cooed again and moved back toward him, his Black still marking everything in reach as he moved. His wings came forward and rubbed up against his nest-sib, and the fear-smell faded again. Pleasure-scent, sharp and earthy, slowly rose from the soft bare skin around the smaller male's neck and stomach. But the fear was trapped in the silk and cotton wrapped around him, and he pulled him closer so he could rub that scent free from the cloth and replace it with his own smell.

He was naked, having no cloth around him like his nest-sib, so it was pleasingly easy to rub his skin-scent into the cloth the smaller male wore. Their chests together, his thighs rubbing at his nest-sib's legs, a deep rumble rose in his chest. The pleasure-scent shifted slightly to arousal. He stilled, eyes wide, pupils dilated to capture every motion of the smaller male's rising chest, parted lips, and fluttering lashes. Not Boy anymore and not just nest-sib either; he was a potential mate!

His mouth fell open in surprise. He breathed in the arousal, memorizing that particular scent belonging uniquely to his nest-sib. He considered briefly and decided he would accepted the offer -
the smaller male was a desirable, compatible match - but he was not ready to mate, soon but not yet. He leaned forward and brushed his cheek against his soon-mate, promising they would mate later, as his wings held the lean, overly warm body close. The Black slipped under the cloth and over every inch of skin to mark it with his scent. *Mine*, the scent said. The tinge of anticipation now riding the Black even marked his nest-sib's status as a potential mate.

As the Black rubbed and stroked and marked, his soon-mate moaned and his scent turned woodsy and musky. He pant ed and shivered at the sound of that moan; his wings quivered. He rubbed their cheeks together once more and slowly pulled away. The smaller male was on his knees blinking up at him, heat rising from his body, the warmth just as inviting as his scent. He cooed at him and smoothed the dark hair back with a wing before pulling his wings tight to his back once more.

Satisfied, zinging, he left his warm soon-mate and stalked through the nest, marking every room with his scent. It was good; roomy but closed. He liked it. It smelled of food and play and companionship. The predator-scent was still outside in the not-fog, but it was faint, the predators far away. This was the edge of their hunting territory. The nest was safe for now. They could stay.

Decided, he turned to go to the food-room and bring food to his soon-mate, but froze as he heard something. He rose up onto his back feet as his Black flared out behind him, still and sharp. He stared out the window from across the room, listening and scenting. Again, a faint cry, along with the faint scent of fresh blood. He bounded over toward the window on all fours and his Black flung it open.

He crouched on the tiny sill, his wings flat against the wall, spread along the inside, to keep him from falling forward. There, the cry was sharper, high-pitched. He breathed deeply and recognized the scent of a fledgling. Fresh blood, pain, and fear… A hurt fledgling!

Howling, he leapt from the window, wings folded as flat and tight to his back as he could manage as he ran low along the ground. The not-fog almost rose above his head, and he bared his teeth in excitement as he hunted, using the not-fog’s scent to mask his own and as a shelter against the bright full moon hanging fat above him. He shifted and came in downwind of the target. Had a fog-predator caught a fledgling? Hunting young was despicable, an easy kill.

But as he tracked the scent, he came not upon a fog-predator but a nest. He slowed, avoiding the patches of light that spilled from the windows, and stalked closer. His talons dug into the earth for traction and overturned the scent of old blood. He growled deep in his throat as another low keen of pain and terror sounded from the nest. Simultaneously, an alpha's scent flared with anger, dominance, and a lazy hunt-scent.

His Black dug furrows in the ground in answer. This fledgling wasn't prey; the scents - old and new - told him this was the fledgling's own nest. The fledgling was another Boy! Only sick alphas terrorized their own fledglings, making them Boys. Fledglings needed protection! Terror made fledglings weak and that weakened the pack! This was a sick alpha, sick as his old alpha had been. Blood thirsty, he felt his Black flare with deadly intent. He knew exactly how to deal with sick alphas.

Fangs flashing, he bared his teeth as he crept forward. The smell of sickness grew. It had been trapped inside the nest, but now that he was crouched below the window it was unmistakable. He had been right. This other pack was contaminated by sickness. It was sharp and sour; this close it almost covered the smell of the fledgling's existence at all, but the yelps of that high-pitched voice told him differently.

He looked carefully into the nest. The alpha was male. A female lay on a long perch beside him. She was glaring at the fledgling in the alpha's grasp. The sick alpha was grabbing the fledgling by her
down, growling into her face. He could see her small body tremble in that grip, could see salty tears
glimmer on her tiny face. The alpha's voice spiked, loud and aggressive, before returning to
growling. The sick female snarled and flung a glass bottle at the wall, shattering it. The fledgling
whimpered at the noise, and the alpha laughed and flung her across the floor onto the glass. Blood-
scent sharply filled his nose even through the glass of the window and the stink of sickness. He
growled.

As the fledgling scurried from the room, terrified, the alpha leaned over and kissed his mate. The
female was limp and accepting. Just as he was about to make his move, the fledgling reappeared and
had another bottle in her hands. She opened it, making fresh blood on her palm run faster. The scent
of sickness rose from the bottle. She offered it to her alpha and he yanked it from her. She flinched
away, cowering. The female yelled and lashed out. The sharp sound of the blow against the
fledgling's cheek was the last straw. Roaring, he exploded through the window, his Black and wings
shielding him from the glass.

Female's screaming pierced his sensitive ears. He snarled and the Black lashed forward, impaling
the sick-female through the throat. The sound cut off only to be replaced by the alpha's roar. He spun to
face the alpha and stood on his back legs at his full height, making himself bigger. He staggered as
the alpha's blow struck his cheek, but his wings snapped out wide for balance and he didn't fall.

Roaring in fury, the Black lashed forward like a hundred swords. The alpha exploded in hot fresh
blood. Large chunks of sick-flesh rained to the floor. Exulted, victorious, he kicked the head of the
alpha away with a triumphant howl. He had bested the alpha! He was Alpha of all alphas! Pleasure-
growling, wings flared gloriously, he turned toward the fledgling. She was pressed into the corner.
Her terror-scent was so strong now that he almost choked on it.

Immediately, his Black pressed flat to his back and he dropped to his knuckles, trying to seem less
threatening to the wounded fledgling. He cooed and moved gently forward. The fledgling began to
keen and the smell of urine hit him like a wave. He stopped, distressed. His right wing moved
forward and gently brushed over her left side. She flinched and screamed before dissolving into
hysterical cries.

Cooing, almost chirping, he moved forward and wrapped the Boy in his wings, pulling her forward
and surrounding her with the White in his feathers. The scent of pain and fresh blood evaporated,
and slowly, so very slowly, the terror drained away with it. He rocked the little fledgling held to his
bare blood-spattered chest. The Boy was small enough to hold with one arm, so he cradled her there
as he moved across the floor to the window.

Once outside, he placed the crying fledgling on the grass and rolled and rubbed until the cold, wet
grass cleaned his skin of blood and the scent of sickness. He stripped the fledgling as well, wanting
her away from the smell of her sick pack. He cradled the Boy to his chest, cocooning her in his
wings to warm her. He turned back to the nest and growled once before kicking dirt at it in contempt.

Satisfied, he moved low and quick on his three free limbs back through the not-fog toward his nest.
He cooed and swayed the whole way and eventually the Boy fell quiet and still. Her eyes were open
and bright under the light of the full moon. She stared up at him the whole time. He rubbed his check
against hers, reassuring the Boy she was safe. She blinked and fresh tears spilled.

He slithered through the window carefully, not wanting to jostle her. He didn't want to put her down,
herscend said she was still fragile, but it was a tight fit through the window for both of them. He was
halfway across the room when his soon-mate burst through the door. The other male was anxious
and agitated, and he sighed, reminded that the smaller male was once a Boy like the fledgling. He
cooed at him, too, and opened his wings to reveal the fledgling in his arms. The Boy whimpered and
was afraid of his soon-mate's loud chattering, but the smaller male immediately fell silent when he saw her fear. He brushed his soon-mate's cheek with a wing in gratitude before moving toward the food-room.

He cuddled the fledgling close. **Safe,** he cooed. **Warm nest, safe nest, lots of food; safe with us.**

She looked at him, eyes not blinking as silent tears rolled down her cheeks. She smelled of sadness and a tinge of fear. She smelled of hope, as well. He brushed her cheek with his and reached for the food, caressing his soon-mate with his wing again as the smaller male sat with them. The Boy took the offering in trembling hands; the smell of her hunger overcame all else as she ate it in quick, darting bites. He chirped at her, very pleased, and looked up at his soon-mate proudly.

The smaller male stared down at the fledgling, a strange expression on his face that he didn’t understand. He barked lightly, questioningly, and his soon-mate looked away quickly. Eyes wide, his wings spread in reaction; concern, that had been the expression. He was concerned for the fledgling. He pleasure-growled, fiercely happy; the smaller male would be a good mate. They would have many fledglings. They would have a strong pack and a safe nest!

He tipped his head back and howled, his blood hot and heart pounding with anticipation. It wouldn't be long before they would mate, not with the smaller male smelling so enticing.

The Boy jumped in his arms, but his soon-mate chattered something low and soothing, and she smiled, her fear fading again. Brushing her cheek with the back of his knuckles, he pushed more food toward her. She smiled up at him and flung her arms around his neck. His Black sprang up as he staggered back. Was she attacking him? Why?

He was about to throw her away from him, but then his soon-mate cooed at him. It was the first intelligible sound he'd heard the smaller male make. He was so startled that he froze. His soon-mate made the sound again, saying, **It's safe, be at peace,** as his hand rested on the fledgling's head and stroked through her down, grooming her, while also stroking his arm, soothing him with the mix of their scents as their skin rubbed together.

He relaxed and realized the Boy was not attacking. She was doing something different, maybe also marking him? He let her, since it was obviously something that she needed to do and his soon-mate thought it a good thing. The marking went on for a while. He definitely smelled like salt-tears when she finally released him. His soon-mate coaxed her into his arms and he let her go, brushing them both with his wings before grabbing some food for himself.

He watched through lazy eyes as the smaller male groomed and soothed the little fledgling. Soon she would be a not-Boy. He rumbled happily at the thought. The fledgling fell asleep by the time he was finished with the food. He chirped and loped into the smallest room. His soon-mate obediently followed. He pressed him and their soon-fledgling into the corner and chirruped sternly. His soon-mate frowned, but he didn't wait. He quickly left the room and went down the hall toward the room with the open window. He ran low along the ground, hunting.

It took longer than he thought, but he returned just as the scent of dawn touched the air. Light would come soon. He moved through the window and hurried toward the small room. His soon-mate and their soon-fledgling weren’t there. Growling, he stalked the house and found them in a bigger room, sitting against the wall and staring at the door. The Boy whimpered in her sleep, her head pillowed on the smaller male's thigh. He growled again, louder, and his soon-mate lifted a stick. He knew it was dangerous, a threat, and he froze.

The smaller male dropped it quickly, but he was still not pleased with the aggressive welcome; however, he respected that his soon-mate was on edge with the need to protect their fledgling. He
tossed his head, his Black still stirring in agitation, and led them back to the little room where he had dumped his hard-found blankets and towels.

They were soft and warm. Some smelled new and clean, others smelled like other humans. He had rubbed the scents away as best he could. In time, they would smell like theirs alone. With a sweep of his wing, he pushed his strangely reluctant soon-mate toward the nest. He lay the little fledgling down and she cuddled into the blankets, the smell of her fear fading once more. Her fear wearied him. He hoped it went away soon. He brushed his wing over her gently and turned expectantly to his soon-mate.

Bafflingly, the smaller male wouldn't lie down. Tired and annoyed at his previous aggression and disobedience, he reached forward and yanked his soon-mate down. His Black ran over his skin, under his clothes, stinging at first. His soon-mate yelped, but then the other male melted against him as the Black turned gentle and possessive. His anger evaporated at the sound of his soon-mate's moan. He rolled so he was covering him completely, rubbing to mark him thoroughly with the scent of his skin while his wing cupped protectively over the fledgling sleeping at their side.

Arousal rose around them like a curtain. Their scents began to blend together and they panted against each other's cheeks as they scent-marked each other slowly, thoroughly. The Black moved restlessly over their heated skin. It was lazy and good and warm. It felt nice and he rumbled, his chest vibrating, as he lowered his head and bit into his soon-mate's neck, marking him permanently. He wasn't ready to mate, but this would do until the time came. He needed a way to track his pack.

Black shadows licked deeply at the bite as he lifted his mouth and the smaller male cried out, arching against him, his fingers digging into the base of his wings. Those fingers in his feathers felt so good that he whimpered. The shadows fell away, leaving a small black feather at the juncture of his soon-mate's shoulder and neck. Despite being all black, he could make out tiny details, like the feather of a raven or crow, glossy and beautiful.

Exhilarated and pleased beyond measure that his soon-mate was clearly his now, forever, he turned to their new fledgling. A small spike of Black pierced her skin and pooled on the surface. She cried out, her eyes snapping open. He cooed at her, nuzzling the down that fell over her ear, his wing still arched above her, filtering out the golden light of dawn streaming in through the window.

She relaxed and reached up for his wing, burying her small fingers into the feathers and scratching at the sensitive skin underneath. His muscles turned to pudding. The Black left their fledgling's skin - not their soon-fledgling, not anymore. She was theirs! - A black feather, identical to his soon-mate's but smaller, was drawn on the skin right below her delicate left collarbone. He could feel the two feather-marks, sense them on a deep level surpassing even scent. It connected them, and no matter how far they were, he'd be able to find them and know if they were ever hurt or afraid.

Content, filled with a happy exhaustion, he lay on his stomach, one arm wrapped around his soon-mate, the other around their fledgling, and spread a wing over them both. Soon they were all asleep, warm in their blankets and safe in their nest.

xXx

Shadow groaned as every muscle in his body throbbed with every beat of his heart. It felt like someone had worked him over with a Beater's bat. The sharp stabbing pains in his shoulders and thighs told him there was a possibility of torn ligaments and that moving wasn't a good idea at the moment. Of course, that judgment went out the window when he heard a soft, high voice ask, "Is the angel okay?"

He sat bolt upright, eyes opening in a flash, and immediately gasped, breath stolen by the flare of
pain that struck through him like lightning. Hands were on his shoulders, helping to lay him back down. Somewhere far away, behind the static in his ears, he heard a familiar voice murmuring. Cracking open an eye, he looked up at Draco.

"Wha…?" he croaked, confused.

"It's okay. Don't move too fast. We're safe," Draco answered softly.

Shadow was grateful he had whispered. He thought anything louder might make his head explode. Trusting his friend, he closed his eyes and just breathed through the pain. When he got it under control, he opened them again and took the glass of water Draco had ready for him. This time he sat up slowly, Draco's arm slipping around his back to help support him.

He took in the strange empty room with baffled eyes. The light coming in through the window told him it was likely late afternoon. He looked down to find himself naked and on a pile of about ten different blankets and towels. A small foot lay in his view. He stopped breathing and turned his head slowly.

A little girl, hardly more than a toddler, sat in the corner, a worn blue blanket wrapped around her small shoulders. Her thick hair lay matted and tangled over her shoulders, the color of a shiny knew penny. Faint freckles were spattered across her nose. Her cheeks were round but not chubby with baby-fat like he would expect. Her eyes were large, a light golden-brown, and were lined with dark circles.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, her little knuckles white around the blanket. She was obviously afraid.

"Uh, I'm… fine," he offered a bit uncertainly. He turned to look at Draco wide-eyed. "I'm okay, right?"

"Yeah," Draco answered with a tired smile. His dyed black hair fell messily around his head and into his face. Shadow's eyes widened. He had never seen Draco look so… not perfect so late in the day.

"Draco, what's going on?" he demanded lowly.

The little girl sniffed and Shadow's head snapped around toward her, horrified to find that she was crying silently, her little shoulders trembling. Oh, god! He reached toward her, but he didn't actually touch her, too unsure for that. He just placed his hand within reach on the pile of blankets.

"Hey… uh… Sorry, I guess I'm just a bit… confused," he said awkwardly. He had no idea what to do. He had no experience with children at all, but for some reason she reminded him of… Suddenly, he had a flashback of when he was Silas in the soul room. He had woken from a nightmare and Boy was curled up at the end of his bed, so desperately hurt. The memory only disturbed him more and he just stared at the little girl helplessly.

Tired eyes - haunted eyes - rose to his. Voice thick and needy, she whispered, "Where did th’angel go?"

"Uh…" Shadow looked to Draco, about ready to strangle the Slytherin if he didn't step in and tell him what in the hell was going on!

"Sweetie, I told you," Draco said gently, so gently that Shadow’s eyes only grew larger. He had never expected to hear such a… gentle tone from him. "The angel only comes when we really, really need him. He sleeps inside Shadow for right now, watching over us. It's magic."

Shadow began to get the picture and felt himself go cold. Seraphim. He now remembered the
burning scar, dropping the compact, and activating his jacket. He turned to look again at the little girl to find her studying him intently. Her gaze settled on his green eye. She looked deep inside it and Shadow felt dizzy all of a sudden, but then she blinked and the strange feeling passed.

"Okay," she answered, hunched within her blanket, her face tear-streaked. "Okay," she repeated and took a deep breath. Shadow watched as the little girl gathered her courage and offered a small, heartbreaking smile.

"We're going to make lunch," Draco said softly, calmly. He was smiling at her as he gently smoothed her tangled hair from her face. She tensed at the touch, but by the third stroke she leaned into his hand, eyes sparkling with amazed, grateful tears, her smile trembling at the edges. "Why don't you rest here, sweetheart. We'll be back with something yummy for you."

"Okay," she whispered, again so quietly Shadow almost didn't hear her. She shut her eyes and curled into a tiny ball, burrowing into the nest of blankets.

Shadow accepted Draco's hand and forced himself not to make a sound as he got to his feet and tottered out of the room. Draco flicked his wand behind him, raising silencing wards. Shadow smiled grimly, knowing Draco was absolutely correct. They would be completely necessary in a second. He clenched his hand around the Slytherin's arm, stopping them in the unfamiliar hall.

"What in the hell is going on? What happened?" he hissed furiously, heart pounding.

Draco looked away and moved forward. "Severus summoned me from Grimmauld Place and brought me here. He told me Seph had emerged and settled in this empty house. He told me to stay, since Seph trusts me, and to keep an eye on him."

Shadow was tempted to interrupt, he really was. If Draco had been watching over him, where in the hell did that little girl come from? However, the shock of his awakening was wearing off, and though he felt a desperate sort of panic, he knew he'd learn more if he just kept quiet. Besides, Draco was handing him his Wizarding robes and his black jacket, the restraining spells deactivated so that it appeared completely normal once again. That was another thing, why was it off? Had Draco deactivated it while he was Seraphim? If he had, Draco was going to seriously regret it. He very well knew how Shadow felt about the jacket!

"That was Wednesday. Today's Sunday." Draco ignored his friend's open-mouthed shock and moved toward the kitchen. To busy his hands, he began making sandwiches. They were running out of bread and tomatoes. "We stayed inside mostly. Took a few walks, went to the gas station to buy food. Nothing went wrong. But last night was the full moon. Seph's Animagus form is half-werewolf. He transformed. I managed to spell the jacket off before it was ruined, but I couldn't save the rest of your clothes, sorry."

"He transformed…” Shadow repeated, dazed.

"Yeah." Draco met his friend's eyes for the first time since he began his recitation. "But he wasn't like a werewolf at all, really. He wasn't bloodthirsty or anything. I think that's because he's half-dove as well."

"What…” Shadow had to clear his throat before he could continue. Shame, fear, and horror churned his stomach. It wasn't a pleasant feeling at all. "What was he like?"

Draco looked away again, making a third sandwich. "I can't really describe it. It was… frightening at first. The transformation is painful. He was frightened and screaming, but when it was complete… He was completely animal-like, intense, you know?" He brushed his bangs from his face nervously.
"He has these huge white wings, beautiful but tragic. Some feathers are mangled and there's dry blood and old wounds on them. His eyes are so… wild and intense," he repeated lamely.

"Did he hurt you?" Shadow rasped fearfully.

"No. I told you. He wasn't a madden beast, not like a werewolf. He was calm and in control. He curled his wings around me, protectively almost, and…" Draco's cheeks turned red.

"And what?" Shadow demanded. He came around the table and spun Draco to face him. "What, tell me!"

"He… It was sexual, okay?" Draco bit his lip, eyes wide with apprehension. "I think he thinks I'm his mate or something."

Shadow instinctively reached out with his empathy; he had to know if he had hurt - maybe even raped - Draco. He was shocked at what he sensed. Draco was afraid, but not of what had happened. It was an immediate fear, fear of Shadow thinking poorly of him. He also sensed remembered pleasure, contentment, and excitement. Confusion coated all this, as well as a bit of shame. Shadow shut his empathy and staggered backward a few steps. God, he didn't think he could handle many more surprises.

Draco tensed, face paling. "I'm sorry." He turned his back, fists clenched on the table.

"God," Shadow said out loud this time. "Draco. Look. I don't know what happened; I'm not judging you. I'm just glad you don't hate me. That you're not tired of all this bullshit already."

Draco turned around, a smirk on his lips, even though the tension hadn't left his shoulders yet. "It won't be that easy to get rid of me."

Shadow smiled back, thankful for his friend's effort to lighten the mood, but he couldn't sustain it. "Tell me the rest. Where did that girl come from?"

Draco nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay. So Seraphim was just… being all animal-like. He was touching everything he could with his shadow-hair and walking around the house. I went to follow and he was just gone. I didn't know what to do. I had no way to contact Severus and no way to know which way he went. It was foggy as hell. I ran outside and called for him, but there was nothing. I looked around for a while, but then I came back to try a different direction. That's when I saw him go through the window again. I ran through the front door and into the room. He had the little girl with him. She was naked and terrified, but Seraphim, he…"

"What? Did he hurt her?"

"No. Merlin, no. He… cuddled her, rocked her. He fed her and, I don't know, cooed at her. It seemed to work. She calmed down and started crying. She clung to him so desperately and he looked so upset about it, about her, you know?"

Shadow could only shake his head, astounded.

Draco smiled at his expression. He knew how hard it was for Shadow to hear good things about his damaged alter. Shadow felt so much guilt for the bad things Seraphim and Demon were responsible for that and he didn't want to forgive Seraphim because that would mean he'd have to forgive himself, and Draco didn't think Shadow knew how to do that.

"Anyway, I took the girl and Seraphim left again. I couldn't go after him, not with the girl here by herself. But he was back in about an hour. He had all those blankets and stuff and made us a bed out
Draco had fallen silent and pensive, obviously upset about something. "Tell me."

"He... um... marked us. Not just with his scent or whatever, he, uh, gave us Marks." Draco turned and pulled the collar of his robe away from his neck.

Shadow walked forward as if he were sleep walking and stared at the black feather tattoo on Draco's falsely tan skin. It was about two inches wide and seven inches tall, following the curve of his shoulder. There were also teeth marks around it. "My God, Draco..." He felt faint, sick. "He bit you, too. Did you know that?"

Draco spun, face pale. "What? I... I don't remember that..." He rushed toward the bathroom and looked in the mirror, feeling the teeth ridges for what they were. "Merlin," he rasped, fear uncoiling in his belly for the first time. "Do you think... I'm a werewolf now?"

"I don't know." Shadow's hands were shaking. "I don't know. God, he marked you! Like... like... a Dark Mark!"

Draco just looked at him. "He marked the little girl, too."

Shadow felt his knees buckle and he sat heavily on the floor. He stayed like that for several minutes, just breathing, shocked. The implications of everything he was hearing, the missing time, pressure about the war and the stupid Horcruxes. It was all too much too quick. He was struggling to keep things together as it was, but now it seemed he'd turn into a werewolf every month, triggering his alter as well. There went all his hopes of being able to just keep Seraphim locked away.

"Okay, okay." Draco ran his hands through his hair desperately and took deliberate deep breaths. "Okay. We need to check the girl. See if she was bitten to or just marked. Then we need to get in touch with Severus, get you more clothes, and maybe get both me and the girl checked up by a real Healer."

Shadow nodded weakly. He accepted the food Draco quickly put together and carried it back into the bedroom. Draco took the silencing ward down as they entered. The little girl opened her eyes immediately when she heard the door open. She relaxed seeing them and sat up with a real smile when she saw the sandwiches and cup of juice.

The two teenagers sat with her and Shadow handed the food to her with the gentlest smile he was capable of. "Um... Hi. I'm Shadow. This is Draco. What's your name?"

"Marissa," she answered sweetly around a mouthful of bread.

"That's a really pretty name," Draco murmured, smiling at her.

She blushed and lowered her long lashes shyly. "Yours is pretty, too."

"Thanks," he said, reaching out to stroke her hair again.

She sighed in contentment and took another bite of her sandwich.

Shadow cleared his throat. "Uh, Marissa. The... uh, angel. He gave you a mark. Can I see it?"

She beamed at him happily and opened her blanket to show them a smaller version of Draco's tattoo just under her collarbone. Shadow didn't see any teeth marks and felt the ice cold terror uncoil a bit of it."
from around his spine. He hadn't turned the little girl into a monster for the rest of her life. There was that, at least. Then he noticed how thin she was. He could see every rib, her stomach was concave, and her legs so very bony.

Worse, fine white scars were scattered over her stomach and chest. He counted three cigarette burns on her left thigh, two on her right. He had no idea if there were more scars on her arms or back, they were still covered by the blanket. Horror washed through him. Marissa was so small, so gentle. How could anyone hurt her? Sure, Vernon had hurt him, but that hadn't really seemed real, not like this.

Boy always took that for him, and in some small corner of his heart, he thought maybe… He didn't deserve it exactly, but he was a freak to them so it was - if not reasonable - perhaps comprehensible in a way. It happening to Marissa was completely different…

He was horrified to discover such thoughts resided inside him. He knew his father would have been appalled had he heard them. What happened to him when he’d lived at the Dursley’s was horrific and completely reprehensible. He knew that, right?

Draco noticed Shadow's face going completely blank the way it did when he was desperately trying to maintain control and decided to take over the questioning. "Marissa, sweetie, can you tell us what happened?"

He had tried to talk to her earlier, but she wouldn't say anything, instead watching over Shadow. They had both woken when the de-transformation had begun. He had held her tightly as they listened to Seraphim's pained cries. He did notice that the dye job and tan were gone. Shadow looked like Shadow: curly black hair, pale skin, with one blue eye, one green.

Marissa looked up at them, her eyes darkening and her face drawing tight. "The angel… He saved me."

Shadow bit his lip and wondered if he would have to leave the room. His hands were shaking so badly, he had to clench them into fists.

"Papa and Mama… They were mad at me. I…” Tears spilled from her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks. "I knocked over Papa's drink."

"Oh, Marissa," Draco sighed and pulled the girl into his lap. She resisted at first, going stiff as a board, but then she melted against his chest and began to cry.

"Papa was so mad,” she confessed, shaking. "He… He… pushed me. I fell and got cutted on the glass 'cause Mama broke the bottle… I should'a been more careful!"

The Slytherin shushed her and rocked gently, his hand stroking her hair. Shadow stared at the scene they made and just felt cold and sick.

"I got Papa a new drink. I tried to be good, but Mama got madder 'cause I didn't gotted her one, too. I didn't know she wanted one!" she wailed into Draco's chest. "I forgot to ask 'cause Papa was mad and I was trying to be quick! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Mama! Papa!"

"Marissa, it's okay. It's okay, sweetheart. It's over," Draco whispered into her ear over and over again.

Shadow stood and went to window, putting his back to the scene. He knew without a doubt what happened next. Seraphim had killed her parents and brought her here. It didn't matter that he was part werewolf at the time. Regardless, he had killed more people. But did Shadow really feel bad about it? They were child abusers. The most foul kind of human being on the planet in Shadow's opinion.
"The angel came and took me away. Mama and Papa are okay, right, Draco?" Marissa asked tearfully from behind Shadow, fear rising in her high voice like a wave as the words finally spilled free. "The angel took me away because he loves me. 'Cause God loves His children. God sent an angel for me, so I don't have'ta be hurted no more. Mama and Papa… They'll be happier without me there to get in the way. So they don't mind that the angel came to get me, right? The angel made me better. It didn't hurt anymore at all! And he… and he… He wants me. I felt it! He saved me and loves me so much. Mama and Papa don't mind, right, Draco? Shadow? They won't be mad? The angel won't leave me?"

She dissolved into hysterical tears and Draco curled around her, holding her close. Shadow found he was crying and covered his face. Yeah, he cared that he killed Marissa's parents. He was glad Marissa was safe now, but she obviously loved her mother and father, and he had killed them, probably right in front of her, no matter what she was trying to convince herself of. He could hear it in her voice.

*What have I done?* he thought desperately. *What am I going to do? What can I do to STOP this?*

xXx

The three of them sat quietly for the rest of the evening as night drew near and the fog grew thicker on the ground. Marissa slept for about an hour, the rest of the time she just cuddled next to Draco or Shadow, whichever of the teens was sitting with her at the time. Draco even went out and got Marissa a sweatshirt, paper, and crayons.

The blue sweatshirt was huge on her, but they rolled up the sleeves to her wrists. It dangled almost to her ankles and a sizing spell tightened the neck so that it wouldn't fall off her shoulders. It was better than her being naked. Shadow wore nothing under his robes and jacket, but he didn't complain when Draco didn't have anything for him. He figured he must have swiped the sweatshirt from someone. They played a few games of Tic-Tac-Toe, Draco calling it Wands and Potions.

Marissa laughed whenever she won. As the day wore on, she grew happier. She was very sweet-tempered and sensitive. Shadow felt cold every time he caught a glimpse of the scarring on her palms and feet. He didn't want to imagine what had done that to her. What animals! He hated that he had killed them, but he decided he wouldn't torture himself over it, not over the likes of them or the Dursleys. Marissa wiggled into their hearts quickly and he felt he would do anything to protect her. He could see that Draco agreed by the way the Slytherin stared fondly at the little girl.

"You won, Draco!" Marissa cried happily, clapping her little hands and bouncing on her knees.

"Finally! I thought you were unbeatable for a little while there," he teased her and tickled her stomach.

She squealed and laughed, flinging herself at Shadow, looking for rescue. Shadow caught her, her small body light and warm in his arms. He mock growled at his friend. Marissa cheered, her little arms around his neck, her breath sweet on his cheek, smelling of grape jam. Draco flung his hands up in quick surrender and stuck his tongue out childishly. Marissa happily stuck hers out in return.

Shadow burst out laughing, falling backward with the little girl across his chest, and suddenly he felt how small she was, saw how much she trusted him. It suddenly hit him hard. He was responsible for this little girl. How was he going to protect her? Suddenly everything just caught up to him. He couldn't stop laughing as tears fell from his cheeks.

At first Marissa thought it was more play, but then she quickly grew subdued. "Draco?" she asked, her big brown eyes wide and beseeching.
"He's okay, sweetie," he soothed her, pulling her into his lap. "He's just tired. I think it's bedtime."

She nodded solemnly, laying her head trustingly on his shoulder. Draco sighed and pet her now brushed out hair. It fell to the middle of her back in gorgeous waves. He carried her to the blankets in the corner and tucked her in.

"Do, Shadow, too," she requested, her eyes on the still chuckling/sobbing teen on the floor.

Draco nodded and went to his friend's side. Shadow looked up at him, panting for breath, tears still spilling freely down his face as Draco knelt. He pulled his friend up into a sitting position and into a hug. Putting his mouth near his ear, he whispered fiercely, "It's going to be okay, Shadow. We'll figure this out. I'm not going anywhere. You hear me?"

"I'm not Marissa. That doesn't work on me," Shadow muttered tiredly. He covered his face, suddenly certain he wouldn't be able to go on. How was he going to protect this little girl from all the bad things that were coming? "What if I turned you into a werewolf, Draco? I killed her parents, bastards though they were. We lost days and haven't done anything to stop the Dark Lord. He's going to destroy us all, Draco. We're so fucked."

"Shadow." Draco pulled away and stared into his friend's eyes. "You aren't a monster. You're just..." His mouth quirked into a wry smile. "...complex, and I for one think that's not such a bad thing to be considering our options. And we're not nearly beaten yet."

"What options?" Shadow rasped, despair in his eyes. "Just... I need a minute. Okay?" He stood and tried to pull away, but Draco held his shoulders firmly. He scowled lightly, too tired for anything else, but was shocked when Draco pulled him in for a kiss.

It was soft and gentle, but at the same time it was burning with longing and desire. Their tongues lapped at each other and Draco's teeth closed on his lower lip right before he pulled away. Shadow found himself breathless and curled into Draco's chest, looking up at the Slytherin through dazed eyes. Draco smiled and brushed his hand through Shadow's hair, his fingers resting at the base of his neck, tangled in the soft curls there.

"Come on," he said gently, his breath ghosting over Shadow's lips. "We're just tired. Let's get some sleep."

Shadow followed him to the bed of blankets. Marissa was watching them and she giggled. Shadow accepted her into his arms as she crawled onto his chest. He held her there, and Draco threw an arm over her back to help steady her. Despite the anxiety tightening his chest, Shadow held her tightly and closed his eyes.

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When he woke up the next morning, he discovered that Draco had been right. He did feel more stable after sleeping. None of his problems had disappeared, but he felt his cool intellect rising to the fore and he sighed in relief. First things first. He lifted his wand and spelled Marissa into sleep, making sure she wouldn't wake until he was ready.

The sun was just breaking over the horizon as he slipped from the bed. He stepped quietly from the room and paced around the empty house. They had no electricity, no furniture - except for the kitchen table - but they did have working bathrooms and running water. For some reason, he found the open rooms comforting. He paced and thought, analyzing the situation as best he could.

He was sick of reacting. He was sick of wallowing in self-doubt and self-hate. It was eating him
alive and he knew better than that, dammit. He had to start planning ahead. Sure, he was juggling a lot, but he couldn't expect anyone else to do it for him. He had to think about this. He had to think and get control of the situation! To do that, he had to force everything but what needed to be done from his mind.

The most immediate thing he needed to take care of was Draco and Marissa. He had to get them checked out by a Healer. Draco could be a werewolf now. The thought that he had turned the person he loved into a monster made acid burn his throat and he shoved that away hard.

Next, he had to go back to Hogwarts and have a long talk with Salazar who obviously overlooked some things concerning Seph/Seraphim. To keep them straight in his mind he was going to call the wolf-bird creature Seraphim and the human alter Seph from now on.

It seemed amazing that old Voldie, the powerful megalomaniac out to destroy the world was third on his list, but it was true. He had to get moving on that. He was sick of this needle in a haystack routine. He needed better intel or the Light was screwed and the Dark Ages were going to come. An image of Firenze came to mind. He'd ask there first. The centaur did say he was trying to prevent the Dark from winning.

The frustration, the fear of what he was facing, the fear of himself, the anger at the impossible position he was in, as well as the fear he wouldn't be able to protect all the people he cared about, now including a very young girl… It was all still there, but Shadow determinedly shut it away. He was done with that endless battle. It was time to think like a Slytherin again.

Draco found him then, black hair tangled and eyes still heavy-lidded with sleep.

Shadow felt a fierce burst of affection for his friend and a deep gratitude that he was still, even after all this, standing by him. "Morning," he murmured. "I figured out why Severus hasn't come by."

"Why?" Draco asked, immediately waking up.

"He's waiting for us to contact him. He's worried that lurking or visiting too often might give away our location. He's probably going crazy that we haven't summoned him yet, but he trusts you to handle the situation, so he hasn't."

Draco shook his head, amazed that Severus would trust him so much and horrified that he was failing some sort of test. Severus was going to kill him for not summoning him when Seph went werewolf. "But he didn't give me any way to…!"

"He gave it to me," Shadow cut him off softly, waving his hand in the Slytherin's direction. Draco frowned, still confused, but then light caught the bracelet and Draco felt the blood drain from his face at the thought of his mentor thinking he was too proud to call him. There went his trust, he thought in despair and frustration.

"I think it's actually a good thing you didn't summon him. Who knows how Seraphim would he have reacted to Severus? At least things were relatively contained."

"Yeah. You tell him that," Draco muttered, still dismayed.

Shadow shrugged and broke the bracelet.

Draco winced and his eyes darted to the front door anxiously as Shadow returned to pacing. Severus arrived in less than four minutes. Draco cringed at the man's dark scowl as he glided through the door, his robes flaring dramatically. That couldn't be a good sign.
"Shadow. Draco," he inclined his head, his dark eyes observing them closely. "Seraphim was aware for a longer duration this time."

Shadow planted himself before his father and spokelowly and urgently, his hands occasionally flashing out for punctuation as he related the events as he knew them. Draco felt like such a coward. After all, Shadow wasn't conscious for any of it, yet he was the one telling Severus what had happened.

Severus must have thought the same thing for when Shadow stopped talking his eyes flashed over toward Draco, a deadly light glimmering in their depths. "I want to observe these events for myself. Let me retrieve a Pensieve."

He Apparated out without another word and Shadow resumed his pacing. Draco felt sick. He was so dead. He hadn't been thinking! The summoning bracelet; Merlin, he was so bloody stupid! He was just so used to Shadow wearing his jewelry that he didn't even see them anymore. Severus reappeared with a crack, a Pensieve in hand. Draco closed his eyes and thought of the last week in as much detail as he could, trying not to worry about Severus's wand at his temple.

Shadow insisted on coming into the Pensieve with them. He had wavered between not wanting to see and needing to see and finally decided that he had to. He expected to feel embarrassment and frustration - he already felt sick over not being in control of himself - but he hadn't expected to feel the hot sting of jealousy.

It only got worse when Seph turned into his Animagus form. Seraphim's possessiveness and animalistic desire and intensity toward Draco took his breath away. Draco obviously had some feelings for Seph. They were friends, Draco took care of him, but he was attracted to Seraphim. In a way, it reminded Shadow of Kit, when he hadn't been aware of what she was doing with Lockhart. Did Draco like Seraphim more than he liked him?

They were released from the Pensieve. Draco stood with flaming cheeks as the two Snapes stared at him. Severus's face was at least unreadable, but Shadow looked distressed. Draco shifted his feet, wishing with all his might he could sink into the floor or become invisible. His nails dug into his palms almost hard enough to break the skin. He had a sudden understanding of why Severus liked his hair hanging loose. He felt almost sheltered behind his bangs as they fell over half his face.

Shadow finally saw his friend's distress and he opened his empathy a crack, immediately wincing at the sharp emotions spiraling within the Slytherin. Severus gave him nothing, he was doing his still pond routine. Shadow shut it down and turned to his father, hoping to put Draco more at ease.

"So… Well, there you have it." He cleared his throat, scrambling for the clear thoughts he'd had that morning. "Okay, so, at least Seraphim isn't like a normal werewolf. He's creepy as hell, but he's not the monster he could have been."

Severus's eyes sharpened on his son, studying him. He was amazed that Shadow would admit such a thing. He had been certain Shadow would react with further disgust for his alter now that he saw him in his Animagus form, which was the representation of Seraphim's soul.

"Marissa… Well, I hate to say it, but I think she needs to stay with us. That mark isn't going away. Erasing her memories won't do anything. It sucks because that puts her in danger. We're fighting a war here, but… I don't see any other way. We can't just dump her with strangers after I've killed her parents. She's my responsibility."

Severus nodded. "I agree the child will be present difficulties, but I see no other alternative."
Shadow smiled thankfully. He wouldn't have been able to live with himself any other way. "I think we need to figure out how Seraphim knew to make those marks in the first place. Could he have more of Tom in him than Salazar thought?"

"We need to travel to Hogwarts in any case," Severus responded, greatly proud of his son. Shadow was handling this much better than he had expected. "We found Mundungus yesterday."

"What!" the teens cried together, everything else forgotten.

"He was planning on selling the locket to a pawnshop as we suspected, but while he was in the shop, Madam Umbridge," he slurred, his voice dark, "happened to see the necklace and bought it off him."

"Umbridge," Shadow breathed, shocked. "This whole time Umbridge had it?"

"I can't believe it!" Draco exclaimed furiously.

"We need to ascertain if the locket is with her at the school, at her office in the Ministry, or at her home," Severus continued. "I suspect she will have it near her, so we will search the school first."

Shadow and Draco shared fierce looks. They were going to enjoy this.

"Before we proceed to Hogwarts, however, I suggest we clothe Shadow and the girl. Eating might be a good idea, as well."

Shadow hated to wait - They were so fucking close! - but his father was right. He did need clothes and so did Marissa. And he was hungry. He'd been hungry when he woke up and hadn't had anything yet. So he nodded and volunteered to wake her up.

Draco swallowed hard as Shadow left him alone with the Potions Master. He stared up at his mentor like a mouse before a snake before he managed to mask his expression into one more appropriate for a Pureblood heir.

"We shall discuss later why you refrained from contacting me immediately when the situation changed," Severus said gently, the threat twice as potent delivered so. His eyes bore unblinkingly into the teenager. Draco felt his knees start to shake. "And we will discuss your reaction to Seraphim's sexual claim."

Shadow entered the room carrying the little girl on his hip. He was smiling at her as she lay her head sleepily on his shoulder. "Marissa, I want you to met my father. His name is Severus. He's a good man and never gets mad at his children." The last was said with a meaningful glance at his father.

Severus purposefully softened his features. It helped that his hair was still short and dyed. He had removed his contacts, but the smile on his face softened them incredibly. "Lady Marissa," he said with utmost respect and bowed deeply. "It is my great pleasure to meet you."

Shadow felt a pang in his chest, reminded painfully that Severus had had a daughter, Tabitha. He remembered the precious baby held in Amalia's arms from his father's memories he witnessed in the Pensieve and had to press his face in Marissa's hair for a moment to cover his lapse. He didn't want Marissa to think he was afraid of his father. She would never trust the Potions Master if she thought that.

Marissa smiled uncertain but game and waved a small hand, the sweatshirt unrolling over her fingers and dangling adorably.

Severus's face looked briefly sorrowful before calming. "We will get you and Shadow some new
clothes. Would you like that?"

"Draco, too?" she asked worriedly, eyes falling on the subdued Slytherin.

"Yes. Draco, too. All of us," Severus reassured.

"Okay, Sev'rus." She smiled and buried her face into Shadow's neck.

Shadow tightened his arms around her and shot a shy smile of his own in Draco's direction. Draco smiled back, some of his tension uncoiling. Severus gathered the teens into his arms. Marissa hooked one arm around Draco's neck from her position on Shadow's hip, and the four of them Apparated away, leaving the empty house behind.

Chapter end.

What do you think about the crazy that's in this chapter? :D
"I've never been shopping before," Marissa said with wide, excited eyes.

Draco smiled over at her. "Well, my dear, I'll be sure to make this a very special day."

Shadow rolled his eyes, shifting the little girl to his other hip. He regretted not going immediately to Hogwarts already. He suspected that Draco could shop forever. Marissa didn't share his dismay. The girl was grinning as her head turned this way and that, amazed at the large crowds and many shops.

"Here's a good place, I think," Draco said confidently as they found a large department store. Shadow sighed with resignation and Draco scowled playfully, bumping his shoulder. "Come on. I promise it won't hurt."

Marissa giggled.

Looking for support, Shadow glanced at his father and smiled when he saw the man's consternation. It seemed true that pain shared was pain halved. Resigned, father and son entered the store. Draco led them unerringly to all the right departments. Marissa followed in his wake, helping him pick out colors and styles of shirts and pants. Shadow and Severus followed, surprised despite themselves.

Draco moved quickly, seemingly able to tell what would or wouldn't work with just a glance. Not twenty minutes after they had stepped foot in the store, Shadow and Marissa were shown to the dressing rooms and were quickly trying on the outfits Draco had chosen.

"You look very nice," Marissa said softly. She stood on the seat as Shadow helped her into her dress. Shadow glanced at the mirror and took in the dark blue silk shirt and black slacks. He thought he looked like Draco. The shirt was okay, but he would've preferred jeans. Maybe it was just his Muggle background.

"You do, too," Shadow smiled down at her. "Like a princess."

Her eyes went round with delight. "Really? A princess?"

Shadow laughed and placed her in front of the mirror. She stared at herself for a long minute before she touched the glass with trembling fingers. Shadow bit his lip, pained by her awe. It was like she couldn't believe the girl in the mirror was really her. Her eyes had tears in them when she looked up at him, obviously overwhelmed.

Shadow scooped her up into his arms. "None of that. You'll hurt Draco's feelings," he scolded lightly, brushing the tears off her cheeks with a gentle finger. Marissa nodded and took a deep breath.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

She wiggled and Shadow put her on the floor before opening the dressing room door. Severus's face softened with a smile as little Marissa walked out. The white dress fell to her knees, the bottom poofy with a crinoline underskirt. Yellow embroidered flowers decorated the bodice and the bottom hem. To top it off, she had on little shiny dress shoes with a sparkly buckle.

"You look gorgeous," Draco said and applauded.
"Very beautiful," Severus agreed with a nod.

She blushed under their attention and twirled in place, the dress and her copper hair flaring out around her. Draco had chosen well. The colors were stunning together. Laughing, she ran into Draco's legs and thanked him tearfully. Shadow and Severus smiled sadly as Draco lifted her into his arms and cradled her there, allowing her to hide her face as she struggled with her tears.

Draco had grabbed some T-shirts, shorts, pants, plain dresses, underwear, and tennis shoes for Marissa, but since they knew the "princess" dress fit, they figured the rest would as well. They moved to the cash register. The woman cooed at Marissa and the teary-eyed girl smiled at her tiredly and offered a little wave. They walked out with four large bags full of clothes for Marissa.

They curly-haired teen shook his head as he put on his black jacket. "What are you? Some kind of professional?" he asked Draco playfully. "We were in there, what? A whole half hour? And Marissa has a complete new wardrobe."

"But of course," Draco said haughtily, tossing his dyed locks arrogantly. "How could you doubt my perfection?"

Marissa giggled, covering her mouth with her hands, while Shadow rolled his eyes. It was quickly becoming a new habit.

"How about lunch here?" Severus asked, gesturing at a small restaurant on the corner.

The teens agreed and they walked in, the smell of good food wafting over them. Draco hadn't had anything good to eat since Seph had come out, and Shadow had been camping with Severus for weeks. They barely glanced at the menu before ordering. Marissa took longer to order. She was too excited to choose and bounced on Draco's lap, grinning from ear to ear as Severus read her the children's menu twice. She had never been to a restaurant before, either. Shadow and Draco exchanged a determined glance over the little girl's head. She would never be hurt or deprived again; they'd make sure of it.

By the end of lunch, Marissa was curled up in Severus's arms, sleeping. The Potions Master had finished his meal long before the two starving teens had and pushed his plate to the side, letting Marissa sit in his lap to color while they finished. Within five minutes, she was fast asleep. Shadow smiled at his father, seeing how carefully Severus supported her head against his shoulder.

"Draco, pay the man, please," the Potion Master murmured softly.

"Very well." Draco patted the corner of his mouth with his napkin and rose to go to the register near the front.

Shadow stared at the little girl, his happiness dimming. What were they going to do with her? If he had any say in the matter, things with the Dark Lord and the Horcruxes were going to be picking up. He didn't want Marissa anywhere near them when the war started getting heated.

"We will figure something out," Severus murmured, catching his son's eyes. "We will keep Marissa safe."

Shadow nodded, accepting his father's words. For now.

xXx

The Chamber of Secrets vibrated with the notes echoing and reverberating from the stone and marble walls. The piano music filled the large chamber the way the sound of the ocean filled a shell.
Everything faded away from Shadow’s mind; the pent up frustrations and fears eroding under the music, under Shadow's aching fingers and bowed shoulders.

Rocking his whole body forward on every downward thrust of his fingers, the piano's voice grew louder and louder. Shadow threw back his head as the beat picked up, became angry. So wrapped up in the moment, the absolute freedom, the perfect release, he didn't realize he wasn’t alone.

Severus backed away silently. He had left Draco and Marissa in a warded room near the Infirmary with Poppy. He had returned to make sure Shadow was not upset with being left alone while Salazar again examined his mind. (They hadn't wanted Minerva to become aware of Shadow’s presence in the school, so they thought it best for Shadow to stay in the Chamber.)

Severus felt his cheeks warm as he intruded on an obviously very private moment. Although, he was glad he had overheard. It was clear by the pounding notes that things were not going well for his son, mentally speaking. Severus had thought the worst was over when Shadow finally merged all his stable alters. Obviously that was a naïve hope.

By merging the stable alters, Shadow was mostly whole and healthy, but that had left the most traumatized aspects of his personality cut off from any mental stability. Now his son had to deal with a very unstable and traumatized alter ego; made worse by the fact that Shadow would be forced to free said alter every month. He and Shadow had both hoped to keep Seraphim locked away until they had time to deal with him. Of course, nothing in his son’s life was easy. He should have guessed they wouldn't be able to temporarily ignore the problem.

Deep in thought, Severus returned to the Infirmary and almost walked right into the Headmistress. Minerva looked tired but also determined. As a Gryffindor, she did not know the meaning of the word "quit". Severus felt his back straighten and he bowed his head respectfully. It was the least he could do. Minerva had granted Draco and he, as well as Shadow whenever he appeared, asylum both here and at Grimmauld Place; she had even apologized to him for the way she had handled their last meeting at the end of last term.

"Severus," she murmured, obviously trying to tread carefully. "What gave them those tattoos? Poppy tells me they are highly magical and are messing with her medical results."

Severus glanced past her to the two medical beds. Poppy was hovering over Marissa at the moment and Draco was watching the mediwitch's every move. (Poppy had asked that he remove the violet contacts. She wanted as few things to disturb her readings as possible.) Seeing him lying on the small bed, Severus was abruptly reminded that Draco was only fifteen years old; still a child, really.

"I will give you a full briefing, Minerva," he murmured, feeling protective of both his son and his Slytherin. "Once I have all the facts and consult with Poppy."

She stared at him, clearly unsatisfied, but she decided to accept that answer. "If you are not aware, Miss Alecto Carrow has taken over the position of Potion Professor, as well as Head of Slytherin House. I would be grateful if you checked on your former students. I fear they do not feel comfortable coming to me or the Deputy Headmistress."

Severus felt his expression harden. He remembered the Carrows very well; they were both sadistic and malicious. Apprehension and cold anger for his Slytherins rose into his eyes and Minerva smiled at seeing it.

"I will be in my office. I'm looking forward to our talk."

Severus wanted to check on his snakes immediately and quickly strode forward to Draco's bedside.
"Is he finished?"

Poppy looked up distracted. "Yes, yes. I believe he is physically healthy, but that mark disrupts any readings of his magical system. Bring him back tomorrow to see if the disturbance has abated."

"And the girl?"

"I'd like to keep her longer. I've found old wounds that I want to be sure have healed correctly. The poor dear." Poppy smoothed Marissa's long hair from her sleeping face. Unlike Draco, the mediwitch had spelled her asleep to prevent her from becoming distressed during the check-up.

"Very well. I shall be back in two hours." Severus met Draco's eyes. "Come. We have things to take care of."

xXx

Draco silently opened Blaise's door. Severus was checking with the Seventh-year students while he checked with his closest friends. Pansy and Blaise were it, really, and he wasn't even sure how much he could trust Pansy. It was late, almost midnight. The bedroom was dark, a faint green glow from the open window filling the room with soft light. Draco closed the door behind him and cast a quick silencing ward.

Without warning, he flung himself to the side, tucked into a tight roll, and came to his feet facing the door and the shadowy form standing where his back would have been a moment before. "Incarceratium," Draco rapped, flicking his wand in a tight, sharp motion.

"Protego," Blaise shouted, stepping forward aggressively. "Contego!"

Draco gasped. Blaise wasn't fooling around. On instinct now, Draco dropped under the spell, not wasting his breath on a shield, instead going on the offensive, casting a spell with two sideways flips of his wand. "Forca comprehendo!"

Blaise's eyes went round as he desperately threw himself out of the way of the spell. His ears buzzed as it passed inches from his face. He scrambled to gather a defense, but Draco was already casting a second spell.

"Pessum ire oculus!"

Everything went black and Blaise froze, his knuckles white around his wand. He was completely blind. Terrified, he waited to be finished off, his lungs constricted, his pulse pounding against his throat. What he didn't expect was a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Blaise. I'm sorry, but I couldn't allow you to hurt me. I'm going to assume our friendship has taken a turn for the worse," Draco said painfully with a little laugh.

"Shut up! I know you're not Draco, so just fuck off. Finish it already. I'm sick of these games!" Blaise hissed hatefully. He lashed out blindly, hoping to land a punch.

"Whoa." Draco stared down at his friend. "Blaise, it's really me. I wanted to make sure you guys were okay here. Guess I can take this as a no."

Blaise held himself stiffly on his knees, shoulders and hands shaking. "Drey? For real? How do I know it's really you?"

Draco flicked his wand and canceled the blinding spell. Blaise blinked at him and leapt to his feet,
wand pointed at Draco's head. The now dark-haired teenager raised an eyebrow, but refused to lift his wand in answer. "Come one. It's me. They may try to impersonate me, but no one has my perfect diction, do they?" he teased with a smirk.

"Bloody hell," Blaise hissed and covered his mouth. He leaned against the wall and just stared at his friend. "What are you doing here, Draco?"

"I thought I'd stop by for tea." Draco grinned and slipped his wand back into his wrist holster. "Catch up with some old friends. You know, make a day of it."

"Can't you be serious?" Blaise came off the wall and stalked over to his bed. He flung his wand down and sat. "This isn't a joke."

Draco expression hardened. "No. It's not. Tell me what's going on."

"What isn't?" Blaise laughed bitterly. "We've been doing our best to protect the younger kids, but Carrow is a major bitch. Luckily, she focuses mostly on the Seventh and Sixth-years, but she whipped a Fourth-year last night. Five lashings on the front, five on the back, just for stopping to go to the bathroom before returning to the dungeon after dinner."

"Who?"

"Harper."

Draco nodded. He'd visit Rogan next. "What about you?"

"Knott," Blaise said hatefully, his eyes flashing malevolently. "I think he's having sex with her or something. He never sleeps in his dorm room anymore and he's gotten really bad. He practices on us, all the new spells Carrow's teaching him."

"Us?"

"Mostly just us Fifth-years, but he's been picking on the younger kids too sometimes just for a laugh."

"Even the Death Eater supporters?" Draco couldn't imagine how bad things were.

"Yeah. That doesn't matter anymore. Now it's if you're a Carrow supporter or not. Pansy has immunity, so does a few others, but mostly we're all fair game. Sucking up to her only makes her suspicious. Adrian Pucey was locked in his dorm room with an enhanced boggart all night for it. We all just keep our heads down, hoping not to be signaled out for her games."

"Games?"

Blaise didn't say anything for a long minute. "What do you care? What are you doing back here?"

"I came to help," Draco said lowly, eyeing his friend. "Do you want it or not?"

Blaise's shoulders slumped. "Yeah. Okay. Games... Every night in the common room she picks two people to duel. The loser is given to Knott to be instructed," Blaise sneered the word and Draco shivered at his expression. "The winner has a private lesson with Carrow. As bad as Knott is, lets just say we try not to win the duel."

"Have you won?"

"No, thank Merlin." Blaise shook his head and stared at the far wall. "I've only had to duel once so
far. I lost."

"Who has won?"

"Pansy, Vaisley, Montague, Cassandra Pucey, and Knott. They've all won a few times, but they get… weirder after every lesson with Carrow. We're all terrified of being alone with the woman."

"I'm going to help," Draco said again, gripping his friend by the shoulder and staring into his eyes.

"I don't know how you can," Blaise admitted. He moved toward the window and took a deep breath. Turning back, his expression was very familiar. Draco felt his shoulders relax as he took in Blaise's mischievous grin. "I don't know how you can," he repeated, "but I believe you. And it's not like we're helpless or anything."

"We're Slytherin," Draco agreed, grinning back.

xXx

Rogan had severe scaring, as well as constant pain from the whipping. Severus provided him with several healing potions and instructed him carefully on their use. Draco found them toward the end of the conversation and the fourteen-year-old's jaw practically hit the floor.

"When you guys go on the run, you certainly don't go half way," he breathed.

Severus smiled grimly. When he had woken the teen from a fitful sleep, Rogan had screamed. Severus had forgotten about his changed appearance until that moment and had been taken aback. Thankfully, Rogan seemed to be adjusting to Draco's presence much better.

"How's the DA?" Draco asked, brushing his black bangs from his face.

"How'd you know I was the Slytherin representative?" Rogan asked, frowning. Only one member of the DA from each House was excused from signing the Secrecy Scroll. Shadow had been the Slytherin representative, but when he didn't come back this term, someone else had to take that position.

"Just a lucky guess," Draco drawled.

Rogan eyed him suspiciously, but then he shrugged. "Fine. Everyone takes turns teaching something to the group. Things are really picking up. Everyone's learning things quickly. Carrow's worse to us, but the other Houses are plenty scared of her. The Headmistress can only do so much."

Draco nodded. "I'll let Shadow know. He'll be pleased."

"Is he here? Is he okay?" Rogan asked, eyes bright.

"He's fine, but it was too risky for him to walk the halls yet," Draco reassured him.

Rogan understood and let it be at that.

Severus cleared his throat and swept toward the door, pulling Draco along in his wake. "Be sure to remember the doses," he warned with a glare.

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

“Draco. Come. We need to talk.”
Draco gave an acknowledging nod to Rogan and followed Severus back to the Chamber. He had escaped Severus's wrath for a lot longer than he'd thought he would. There was no use trying to delay the inevitable any longer.

Severus felt murderous after hearing of the corruption and torture Carrow had poisoned his little snakes with. It had pushed him back into a mindset he had thought he'd done away with years ago. Alecto Carrow would not live through this second war; he'd see to it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he should wait to talk to Draco until he had a better hold of his temper, but they were running out of time and remembering Draco's failure to alert him to his son's need only fed the anger. Grim, Severus descended into the entrance room of the Chamber, cast a powerful silencing ward toward the heart where Shadow still played, and turned with malicious intent.

Draco took a half-step back. "Sir…"

"Draco," Severus drawled, poignantly sweet. "Even someone of your limited intelligence should be aware of when to call for help. You're no Hufflepuff or Gryffindor to arrogantly believe you can handle any situation. This leads me to question why else you didn’t summon me."

"I…” Draco’s back straightened and his grey eyes narrowed. "I was pretty focused on Seraphim, sir. I wasn't really thinking about anything else."

Severus's voice dropped and softened dangerously. "Seraphim had disappeared; he could have been hurt or captured; he did hurt others. Again. Maybe you weren't aware of the impact such an act would have on Shadow's mind? Mayhap I was mistaken regarding your comprehension of the situation?"

"I am aware," Draco answered stiffly, his fists clenching.

"Then possibly you simply panicked; you were just overwhelmed," Severus continued. He slid forward and began a slow circle around the slender teen. "I overestimated your competence, perhaps."

Draco's jaw clenched.

"Or maybe you enjoy the power you have over Seraphim and didn't want it lessened by another's presence."

Draco spun to stare at his teacher in shock. "What?"

"You are Slytherin. You understand the value you possess in being the only one Seraphim trusts. That position would have been compromised had you called for help. Or maybe it’s a sexual jealousy. You obviously enjoyed Seraphim's company. Maybe you wanted to keep secret the effect he had on you, afraid that your lust would be revealed."

"SHUT UP!" Draco exploded. He literally saw red. Small rocks strewn about the small room disintegrated with sharp cracks. Larger stones rattled and danced as if the earth itself were shaking with his rage. "How dare you," he hissed, eyes blazing as he stepped forward.

Severus went still with shock.

"How dare you imply I would take advantage of him! After everything that has happened to him, after watching him suffer, after working with Boy, you think I'd manipulate him for sexual pleasure or even political power? Let me make this perfectly clear." Draco's voice crackled with magic and
Severus felt the first faint stirrings of misgiving. "I don't give a fuck about where I stand with anyone. Shadow is the only one who matters to me. I'd never hurt him and I won't let anyone else hurt him, either. Not even you, Severus."

Thin lines of Black magic began to twine around Draco's torso, emanating from the pulsing feather on his collarbone. Draco face was utterly cold and murderous. The Black magic urged his temper higher, singing to him about the sheer pleasure of destroying things.

Severus felt the almost sweetness of that power. It was purer than anything he had ever experienced with the Dark Lord, but years as a slave to Voldemort had taught Severus a lot. He immediately sunk to his knees and tilted his had slightly to the side, exposing his long throat.

"Had Shadow heard your vile accusations, he would have been devastated." Draco stepped closer, eyes wide and glittering as he observed the man's submission. "If I ever hear you questioning me like that again, or even hinting at such things to Shadow, I will make you pay. Do you understand me? You're his father; you saved him. Be very careful how you use your influence, Severus. I'll worry about mine."

"Draco."

The Slytherin didn't acknowledge the voice. All he could see was Severus; the man who had the audacity to imply he could do such a cruel thing to Shadow. The mere thought of someone using Shadow like that made him want to scream.

"Shadow's fine. No one hurt him. He's fine."

Draco finally turned. Neville stood a few feet away at the bottom of the entrance. His hands were open and empty, slightly in front of his body. Neville held his gaze, the dark brown drawing him in. The rage calmed slowly. As it did, Draco's mind cleared, but he didn't for a second feel regret.

"Longbottom. What are you doing here?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Rowena told me Shadow wanted to talk to me," Neville answered as Severus got to his feet.

Draco kept his back toward his teacher, afraid seeing him would set off his temper once more. He nodded to the Gryffindor once and moved past him toward the entrance.

xXx

Shadow hunched over the piano's keys, his arms wrapped around his chest. Sweat slid down his face and dripped from his chin, splashing on a pure white key. Heat constricted his chest as he felt the tugging vacuum at the back of his mind awaken. Grunting, his two-colored eyes glowed with effort as he held to consciousness. Seph pulled restlessly at him, not quite exerting his full strength in trying to tug him under.

"Not going to let you, you bastard," Shadow growled. "I'm not going anywhere."

He'd been playing when all of a sudden his curse scar - now linked to Seph and not Voldemort - flared up again. The alter had just come Out. What could possibly have him restless already? Frowning, Shadow grit his teeth and looked toward the Entrance room.

Standing took all his concentration. He felt like his mind was made up of glass and moving too quickly would shatter his control. The pressure in his mind was slowly building. He walked carefully, his body painfully straight. So lost in his own mental battle, he didn't notice the silencing ward as he walked through it, but the sudden voices gave it away.
"Shadow's fine. No one hurt him, Draco."

That was Neville's voice. Eyes wide, his breath hissing out as the pressure finally began to release him, Shadow moved around the final corner only to freeze at the scene before him. Neville stood at the bottom of the entrance, hands out in surrender. He was staring at Draco who was staring back. The Slytherin stood stiffly, his hands fisted at his sides. Severus was a few feet away from them, kneeling and watching the two teens with a shuttered expression.

"Longbottom. What are you doing here?" Draco asked in a hoarse whisper. The smell of magic was heavy in the air. Rocks were strewn around him and his clothes were disheveled as if he'd been in a windstorm.

"Rowena told me Shadow wanted to talk to me," Neville answered as Severus got to his feet.

Draco nodded once and began to head toward Neville, obviously intending to go past him and leave the Chamber.

"Draco. Wait. What's going on?" The Slytherin froze. Severus and Neville stared at Shadow warily and he glared back. "What? Weren't you going to tell me about this little spat?"

Draco turned to face his friend and walked across to him without hesitation. "It's nothing. Severus was just chewing me out because I didn't contact him sooner. I overrated. It's my fault."

"Uh huh," Shadow drawled, unconvinced. He eyed his father. "And you got on your knees why?"

"My footing became unsteady and I deemed it unwise to raise a shield or any other magic while he was in such a temper. Ducking seemed the wiser course," Severus explained, voice level, face still blank. "We will be discussing your control or lack thereof later, Draco."

"Yes, sir."

Shadow eyed his friend suspiciously, but Draco didn't seem upset by this prospect. Except for being a little pale, he seemed calm now.

"Excuse me. I'm going to inquire after Madam Pomfrey's report concerning Draco and Marissa's check up." Severus gave a little nod toward them all and strode out of the Chamber without a backward glance.

"We're all a bit tightly strung," Draco said to Shadow's questioning glance. "We didn't find out good news about Carrow."

"Are you all right?" Neville asked, frowning at Shadow's sweat-soaked face and limp curls.

"Let's take this somewhere more comfortable."

He turned and led the two teens further into the Chamber. They passed the basilisk and moved toward the two sofa chairs and the piano, which still sat innocently in the corner a few feet away. Shadow had picked up one of the fallen rocks and now he set it down. Swirling his wand slowly, he stared at it through half-lidded eyes. Slowly the rock morphed into a chair that matched the other two, except this one had stone-colored cushions instead of the green that the other's sported.

Draco sat in a green one and smiled in appreciation at Shadow's transfiguration. The curl-haired teen smiled wryly back. It wasn't his best skill. Considering that, he took the grey chair and gestured Neville into the other green one. If the transfiguration didn't hold, he didn't want his brother to be dumped to the ground.
"So what did you and Severus find out?" Shadow asked, looking expectantly at Draco, letting the topic of the fight go for now.

Draco told them about Carrow's strange lessons behind closed doors with the upper years and her focus on Knott especially. Neville's brow furrowed angrily at the mention of the enforced duels and the equally horrible consequences of winner or losing, but it wasn't until Draco described Rogan's punishment that he couldn't keep his silence.

"I don't understand! Why doesn't McGonagall do something?"

"Carrow was Ministry approved. She can't expel her. And it's not like any of the students are coming forward, either," Shadow pointed out, rubbing at his forehead tiredly.

"Why not? They should turn her in!" Neville insisted.

"It's not that simple and you know it," Shadow answered pointedly, meeting his brother's angry gaze. When Professor Lockhart had done bad things to them, they hadn't come forward either.

"Not only are they afraid they won't be believed, but they fear Carrow's retaliation." Draco stared down at his hands that were fisted on his knees. "McGonagall is barely holding her position as Headmistress as it is. She can't make trouble or the Ministry will kick her out for incompetence, likely elevating Umbridge into her place and gaining complete control over Hogwarts in the process."

"There must be something we can do!" Neville exclaimed.

"Of course there is. You're only helpless if you think that way," Draco snapped, glaring at the Gryffindor. "Severus is going to talk to the Hufflepuff phantom and maybe even Godric. He's in charge of wards. If we can make the dorm rooms safe, that would be a big help. The Slytherins are exhausted, hardly sleeping for fear of an attack while they're vulnerable. If we can just ensure them protection once they are in their rooms, they will have a place to regroup and strategize, as well as rest."

"That's it?" Neville wanted to do something more.

"It's the best we can do for now. Anything more will seriously antagonize Carrow and make things worse." Shadow reached over and squeezed his brother's hand and was glad when the taller teen didn't flinch or pull away in disgust. "We'll keep thinking of things, but Slytherins are pretty resilient and good at self-preservation."

"Still..." Neville grumbled. "Maybe we can help them in class and stuff. Make sure Carrow has no reason to be alone with them."

"That would be good," Shadow encouraged.

"But be careful," Draco warned. "She hasn't really gone after anyone from other Houses, but that could change."

Neville nodded and looked back and forth between the two Slytherins. "So... What are you guys doing back here? Does McGonagall know you're here? How did you get in?"

"Severus Apparated us into the Forbidden Forest just outside the anti-Apparation wards. There's a hidden passage from there into the Chamber." Shadow gestured at an open side door near the massive statue of Salazar Slytherin. "McGonagall knows Severus and Draco are here, but she's not sure I am."
"She granted us all sanctuary here, as well as returned our status as Order members," Draco added. He smiled slyly over at Shadow. "She even apologized for her unprofessionalism in dealing Severus, a trusted Order member, an ultimatum last term."

"I wonder how much of that was said because she found out I'm Harry Potter, the Chosen One," Shadow sneered.

"She knows?" Neville frowned.

"Charlie found out from the twins and I'm certain he told the rest of the triad. I'm not sure how much of the Order knows," Draco shrugged. "It was bound to come out."

"It's good that they know," Shadow admitted. "It gives me more leeway. They're all so desperate for some kind of leverage in this war that they're going to be bending over backward to accommodate me. Besides… this war is starting to get messy and it's only going to get worse. I can't do this alone."

"I'm glad you figured that out." Neville grinned, pushing his shoulder.

"Shut up," Shadow scowled playfully.

"Did you hear what they did to Bones?" Draco asked.

"What?" Shadow demanded when Neville nodded solemnly.

"They murdered her and it wasn't pretty. She was head of MLE. Susan Bones, a Fifth-year Hufflepuff, her niece and adopted daughter, is pretty upset about it," Neville answered. "She came back to the DA after the funeral pretty bloody-minded and determined to fight. Ginny says her attitude is beginning to infect the rest of the group. It's definitely not a game anymore."

"Thank god we know where the locket is." Shadow's fists clenched and his eyes glowed faintly. "This has got to stop."

"You found the locket?" Neville about jumped out of his seat. "Where is it?"

"Umbridge had it this whole time," Draco said in disgust, lip curled. "We hope she has it here with her. As soon as we get our hands on it, we'll bring it down and stab it with a basilisk fang."

"Umbridge?" Neville gasped, eyes wide. "Really? Wow."

"And I've thought of a great way to find it if she does have it," Shadow smiled darkly. "But before that… Nev, we need to get you caught up with the developments concerning Seraphim. And… I wanted to talk to you about what I said at your house the other day…"

"Forget it." Neville shook his head and smiled at his brother. "Nothing's changed. I…" He glanced at Draco who's grey eyes were watching them curiously. "I don't exactly understand what's between you, but I know it's sincere."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "You have a problem with me being with Shadow?"

"At first," Neville admitted painfully, cheeks hot. "But not anymore. I can tell that you both… uh, care, deeply for each other. We all need to be able to rely on someone, especially now."

Draco scowled, a snide comment on his lips, but Shadow's hand slashed out at him, a warning in his eyes. Settling back in his chair mutinously, he listened as Shadow described the events of the last few days, including the marks and Marissa. He left nothing out, except the sexual dimension between
Draco and his alter. Draco wasn't sure if this was because Shadow was a private person or because Neville was uncomfortable with their relationship.

And wasn't that a surprise. He never expected Neville to be a source of doubt. Draco watched the Gryffindor through cold eyes during Shadow's rundown. He'd first thought Longbottom was an inept fool, but he had slowly come to see there was power under all that insecurity. In St. Mungo's, he realized that power was tempered by wisdom achieved through suffering. His parent's condition and Madam Longbottom's utter determination to constantly fault Neville in an attempt to drive him to perfection had taught Draco that the Gryffindor was stronger than he looked. But more than all that, Neville had stood by and supported Shadow unalteringly since third year. That went a long way to getting Draco to tolerate him or to give him any credit at all.

Until now.

He was getting the feeling that Neville had been more than just a little against his relationship with Shadow, and Shadow had broken down because of it. Was that why Seph had come Out at the Longbottom's? Had Shadow run to Neville expecting a safe haven only to discover more enemies? Neville had found the damned straitjacket. Was he thinking Shadow needed to be contained for more reason than just Seraphim? Did Shadow believe the same, deep down? Did Shadow still believe he had a mental illness because of his attraction to Draco?

"I'll help however I can," Neville was saying.

"Thanks. I'll keep in touch by leaving messages hidden in the bathroom under the second sink. You can do the same. Be careful not to get caught, though."

"What happened to the two-way parchments?"

Shadow shrugged. "I've lost track. Maybe the house, maybe Grimmauld Place. Either way, I don't have the master copy here."

"Okay." Neville stood and hugged his brother. "Well, I should get back. It's getting late and I don't want to be missed."

"See you." Shadow smiled mischievously. "Things are about to get interesting. Do me a favor and send the twins down tomorrow night. Tell them to knock twice, pause, and knock once more. I'll set an alarm spell to be triggered by that pattern to let me know when they're at the entrance to let them in."

Neville grinned back. "My pleasure."

Shadow waved goodbye to his brother, but he was really watching Draco. The Slytherin had a distinctly predatory gleam in his eye that he didn't like. "Draco, leave him alone. He didn't do anything wrong."

"No? Then what really happened that night at his house?" Draco asked back, not giving an inch.

Shadow ran his hands through his hair raggedly. He really didn't want to get into this. "Just drop it, okay. It was between me and Neville. It's over now." Determined to change the subject, he narrowed his own eyes. "We have other things to talk about."

"Severus will be back soon," Draco threw out, stalling.

"But not yet." Shadow smiled grimly and turned his chair so they were sitting face to face. "I didn't think I'd press you about what happened with Seraphim, but… I can't stop thinking about it. Was it
all magic induced or is it something more? Do you really like Seraphim like that?" Do you like him more than me? he thought but couldn't bring himself to voice. "I don't understand how you can feel that way toward him. And it makes me feel like… I don't know. My body's doing something without me knowing it. It reminds me a bit of Lockhart. Not that I think you took advantage of him, but that's the truth. I want truth between us, Draco. There's too many lies to keep straight with everyone else and I can't handle that with you."

Draco sat absolutely still. His father had drilled it into him not to give away anxiety or discomfort. It could be used against you. Pressed to the wall, all his Pureblood lessons were back full force. He tried to make his face blank, expressionless, but tension trembled at the edges of his eyes as he met his love's troubled gaze. He had to give Shadow credit. His seemingly open comments were really heavily weighted to make him feel guilty. How very Slytherin; an attack disguised as an innocent invitation to honest discourse.

"It's hard to explain," Draco said tightly. "But the thing is, I admire you for what you've survived and the way that you are determined to win against everything set against you. To me, there is no him and you. From the very beginning, Boy and Demon were always a part of you. The part that suffered so that you could survive."

Shadow shifted and looked away. Marissa had revealed to him how much he hadn't come to terms with. Seeing the psychological and physical evidence of abuse with Marissa made it real that his body, his mind, had suffered even worse cruelty for years longer than she had. It was startling and very uncomfortable. He never saw himself as a victim. Even when he felt overwhelmed, he never felt victimized. Even with Lockhart, it was a manipulation. He'd been used against himself, betrayed himself, really, but a victim? Not exactly.

Draco came out of his chair and knelt before him. "Shadow. Look at me. Why does that really bother you?"

Shadow considered dropping the topic, but he realized it wouldn't be fair to Draco. "I never thought of myself in terms of being Boy, suffering the way Boy suffered. I, Shadow, was never beaten and broken like I know he was. I don't associate myself with that kind of trauma because I'm not damaged. It bothers me that you always thought of me in those terms."

"Boy is traumatized, mentally wounded," Draco said slowly, carefully, "but he's also vulnerable in a way that you never allow yourself to be. I admire his strength, but I also feel honored that he trusts me with his safety and wellbeing. To know that you trust me so much really means something special to me. I've never been trusted with anything that important."

Shadow began to wish he hadn't asked. This was a lot more information than he expected out of Draco. It was unlike the Slytherin to be so honest, especially about his feelings. "Why are you telling me all this?"

Draco's hands tightened around his. His eyes flashed with temper and embarrassment made his cheeks flushed. "Because I cannot bare it that you associate me with Lockhart. I need you to understand."

"Draco…" Shadow frowned. "I don't…"

"Just listen," he snapped. Closing his eyes, he took a deep steadying breath. "Seraphim, Demon or whatever… I always knew he was inside you. How could I not? Just hearing about what happened to you makes me so mad that my control slips. I can't imagine experiencing the horrors you have. I understand that rage and hate is dangerous. I saw with my own eyes what that uncontrolled fury is capable of. But as horrible as it was, I was still thankful. Thankful that you could still fight back, that
you still felt you deserved to be angry about what happened to you. That you wouldn't let anyone hurt you like that again. I appreciate the power Demon holds."

"He murdered people," Shadow growled. He stood and walked a bit away, needing space. "That's not admirable."

Draco stood and said with brutal honesty. "Murdering innocents doesn't attract me, but I am not above murderous impulses. I'm glad the Dursleys are dead. I'm glad they were tortured. It makes me feel satisfied. I laughed when I saw Demon tearing apart Death Eaters in that graveyard. I vowed on my magic to murder Lockhart myself. You aren't alone, Shadow. We all have a little bit of Demon inside us. Your Demon was just honed to a deadly point by the torment and hate piled on you."

Shadow just stared at him. He'd never really considered that before, that others had the same impulses as he did. Demon was a monster, born from Voldemort, fed by Shadow's dark emotions, but Seraphim wasn't shaped by Voldemort anymore and he still killed. That knowledge had made him feel so disgusted with himself he'd almost lost it, but Draco was saying that he wasn't a monster, that others - normal people - had the same feelings as Seraphim. That didn't clean him of the innocent lives he took, but it did make him feel less like an alien, inhuman thing.

"As for what happened yesterday…" Draco's head tipped forward, his hair curtaining his face. "Seraphim is wild, frightened, hurt. When he turned into his Animagus, some of that trauma fell away, leaving a being in complete control over his magics and himself. He was powerful, intense, instinctive… Yes, it was attractive. Seraphim is you, Shadow. He exhibits your uninhibited feelings, your power. And his Black magic is incredibly seductive. When he wrapped me in it… I can't describe that raw, primitive force…"

"I get it," Shadow snapped, glaring. He didn't want to hear anymore of this. He really didn't.

"I'm telling you the truth," Draco snapped back. "Seraphim is your rage. He's your vulnerability exposed for me to see. He possesses an incredible power that you were forced to grab hold of because nothing else would save you."

Shadow tossed his head and strode toward the exit, anything to get away from Draco.

"I love you, Shadow! All of you."

Shadow froze. They had never, ever spoken those words to each other. Shadow had admitted it when Draco lay dying, but never out loud where they both could hear. Tears burned his eyes and his shoulders began to tremble. Draco's arms slid around his waist and pulled him back against his chest.

"Completely. Every part of you," Draco murmured in his ear. "You're my best friend, the center of my life. I want to touch you, every part of you. I want to know I have an effect on you. I want to share myself with you, and I want to be desired by all of you. I want all you can give me because that's what you already have from me. My heart and soul are yours."

"Draco," Shadow moaned and closed his eyes. "What the hell do I say to that?"

"Whatever the hell you want," he answered wryly.

Shadow opened his eyes and spun in Draco's grip. He attacked his love's mouth, hands tangled sharply in his hair. Draco growled, his hips thrusting once. Shadow gasped, pulling his mouth away, and began to attack his shirt, pulling it roughly over Draco's head. Overly warm hands roamed over Draco's lean chest, his flat stomach, and Shadow suddenly couldn't touch enough.

Kissing hungrily, Draco fell backward into a chair, Shadow pulled into his lap. Their eyes dilated
with pure unadulterated lust as they thrust against each other. Shadow's back arched and Draco lifted Shadow's shirt high enough so he could lick and bite at his sensitive nipple. Crying out, Shadow drove his hips forward.

"So fucking gorgeous," Draco rasped hoarsely. His fingers curled around Shadow's slender hips and helped him move up and down. "Want you so bad."

Shadow felt those feverish words strike through him as Draco's wide, silver eyes burned up at him. He launched himself at Draco's mouth, trying to swallow those words. To be wanted, to be desired, not for his body, but for his mind, his power, his vulnerability, it was heady stuff. He felt himself tremble, tears coursing down his face even as he burned with passion and need.

"Draco… ah… uh… please… Ah!"

Draco growled and whipped his hand forward, undoing his love's pants and grabbing him firmly. "I got you, Shadow. Let go. I've got you."

Shadow arched and exploded, trusting in Draco and letting the pleasure flood through him. He screamed out as he released the tight control he held over himself. Panting, tingling and twitching, Shadow collapsed limply against Draco. His love held him steady with one hand, the other wet from Shadow's cum went to his own need. Shadow felt Draco pump himself twice before he cried out, arching into Shadow's limp body before relaxing back into the chair.

Grinning, Draco turned his head to the side and kissed Shadow's cheek. They were both sweating buckets and he wiped the salty moisture off his love's brow and ran his hand through his soft curls.

Shadow watched him through sleepy eyes. "I love you, too," he whispered and closed his eyes.

Chest tight with too much emotion to really name, Draco gently turned Shadow sideways across his lap, letting the teen's legs dangle over the side of the chair and rest his head on Draco's shoulder. He slipped his arm around Shadow’s back and cradled him there while his other hand found his wand and cast cleaning and drying spells. Shadow breathed deeply, peacefully asleep, and Draco felt such overwhelming love that he began to tremble. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back and just tried to breathe evenly past the lump in his throat.

**Chapter end.**
Returning to Hogwarts

While the teens were sleeping, curled up in the sofa chairs, Severus returned with Marissa. Madam Pomfrey had discovered old fractures in her arms. There was still evidence of the three fractures - two in her right, one in her left - but now the bone was as strong as if it had never happened. There were also ill-healed scars on her back that made twisting uncomfortable. Pomfrey had repaired the damage as best she could, but you could still see them.

Pomfrey had also estimated the girl as being three and a half years old. She hoped whoever had hurt the precious child had been held accountable for their horrific actions. Severus kept his face perfectly neutral as he assured her that they had.

"I'm not sleepy, Sev'rus," Marissa whispered softly so as to not wake the two teens sleeping together in the chair.

Shadow as in Draco’s lap, his curly head of hair resting in the crook between neck and shoulder, his arms tucked in close to Draco’s chest. Draco had one arm curled around Shadow’s butt, the other hung limp over the chair’s arm. Marissa was still in her pretty dress and she swished it back and forth just to feel the material move around her as she stared at the two sleeping teens.

"I suppose not. You've been asleep most of the day. However, the boys have not slept, so leave them be," Severus instructed.

He looked around the Chamber. The huge, half-dissected basilisk sprawled near the doorway, which led to a short hallway that opened up into the room at the bottom of the slide hidden within Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. At the back of the large oval room stood Salazar's great statue. Six huge pillars on each side rose up into an elegant arched ceiling. The side door that led to the passage into the Forbidden Forest stood open because once shut it became invisible.

"If I were a great wizard," Severus murmured, glancing down at the little girl, "and this were my great Chamber of Secrets, it would be more than just a large empty room. I bet this Chamber has more secrets yet."

Marissa smiled up at him, her light brown eyes dancing with excitement. "There's more secrets, Sev'rus?" she stage whispered.

"Yes, my dear. That is exactly what I think. Care to become an explorer?"

"Oh, yes!" She took off running toward the statue but then froze, her eyes wide and worried. "But what about my pretty dress?"

Severus smiled. "I believe that is what magic is for." He pointed his wand at the girl and muttered protection charms. "There. That should do it."

Marissa was so happy she bounced on her heels and thanked him very politely.

Severus inclined his head graciously. He very carefully kept the pang of sadness he felt from his face. The child had wanted, for a split second, to hug him, but she was still afraid that physical contact meant pain. It would be a long while yet before she initiated a touch.

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Shadow woke to a dog licking his face. "Ugh!" he cried, sitting up and wiping the drool from his cheek. "Sirius!"

The big black dog barked, his tongue lolling in a doggie grin.

Scowling, ready to yell at his godfather for his immaturity, he froze and looked around. He was in a bedroom. Opulent and splendid, thick lush Persian carpeting, ornate golden bedposts, midnight blue silk sheets, and a white down comforter. An Italian armoire stood against the wall and a heavy matching chest sat at the foot of the bed. Oriental landscape paintings hung on the wall and were so clear and precise, they almost made it seem like he was looking out windows.

"Sirius, where am I?" he asked in a hushed whisper. He looked up and gaped at the intricate painting on the domed ceiling of angels and demons fighting a waged battle among the clouds.

Sirius transformed into his human self and laughed hard. "Better than… I expected… if you could see… your face!" he said between guffaws.

"Just answer the question. Where are we?" Shadow demanded. He climbed out of the tall bed and realized he was still dressed in the jeans, long sleeved shirt, and black jacket he'd had on the day before. At least no one undressed him without letting him know.

"The Chamber. Snape let me in this morning. The side door is still open so we can get in and out through the Forbidden Forest without you. I was meeting Remy there so we could switch places again and Snape found us." Sirius, wiping tears from his eyes, slung an arm around the slender teen's shoulders. "What do you expect from Slytherins, Harry? Snape found a whole suite of bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining area, four studies dedicated to the four foundation subjects of magic, and a small library all while you were snoring away."

Shadow rolled his eyes. "Well, excuse me. And don't go back to calling me Harry."

"Sorry," Sirius said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "Don't know where that came from."

"It's all right."

They walked through a curving hallway with doors on either side. Going through a large arched doorway, Shadow stepped into the dining area. A long wooden table, similar to the tables up in the Great Hall stood ready with fruits in bowels and candles spread down it's length. Unlike in the Great Hall where one long bench sat on either side, there were about seventeen chairs, padded and upholstered. Severus sat at the head of the table, Draco sat to his left, a tired but happy Remus sat to his right.

"Where's Marissa?" Shadow asked, taking the seat next to his boyfriend. Draco quirked an eyebrow at him with a smirk.

"She's sleeping. She was up late helping me find these rooms," Severus answered. "Omi!"

A crack sounded and the little elf appeared with a dignified bow. "Shadow is awake. Please serve breakfast now."

"Yes, Master. Right away." Omi disappeared again and not a second later plates appeared before each of them. Sliced tomatoes, two eggs over easy, some sausage and bacon, and toast sat on each. Juice, tea, and coffee appeared in the middle and they each chose and poured what they wished.

"You summoned Omi?" Shadow asked, grateful because his stomach was desperately empty.
"I did. Slytherin's Secret Chamber is still unknown to the majority of people. I was afraid summoning Hogwarts's elves would alert Headmistress McGonagall to its location." Severus poured himself a large cup of coffee and added neither milk nor sugar.

"Draco was just telling us about your new family addition." Remus smiled at the ruffled and sleepy teen.

"Yeah. We need help taking care of her." Shadow sighed and glanced at his godfather. "You're not busy. Can you watch her?"

Sirius looked startled. "Me? You want me to watch a little girl? I don't know anything about kids!"

"Come on, Black. Don't tell me you're afraid? She's not even four feet tall," Severus sneered over at the Animagus.

"I don't see you volunteering," Sirius snapped.

"I've been watching her for two days. I have no problem with Marissa's company. However, I will be otherwise engaged in fighting the Dark Lord to care for her full-time." He patted at his mouth and took a sip of coffee, his eyes dancing with joy at being able to bait the man.

Sirius slammed his hands on the table, making the plates and glasses rattle, as he leapt to his feet. "I'll be fighting, too, Snivellus!"

"Sirius…” Shadow shot his father a warning glance. "I know you'll be helping us fight. When you can't watch her, we'll let someone else watch her, maybe someone available in the Order. I'm just talking day to day for now. You'll be helping us plan, but going out is another matter. You're still a wanted murderer by the Ministry. You have to keep a low profile."

"I can be disguised. And it's not like you're not wanted by those fools, either!" Sirius protested, scowling at them.

"The Headmistress managed to get Fudge to rescind the order to have my son and I arrested on sight," Severus informed him, "as payment for her assistance."

"I bet he loved that." Remus smiled a toothy smile that Shadow and Draco shared with him.

"Well, hell…” Sirius sighed dejectedly. "Fine. I'll watch her."

"Thanks, Sirius." Shadow reached across the table to pat his hand. "I'm sure it'll be fun. She's really sweet."

"Speaking of the young…” Remus squared his shoulders and sat straight in his chair. "I have news."

"Moony!" Sirius barked and began laughing. "You didn't! You old dog!"

"Care to explain?" Severus asked darkly.

"It seems that our preventive measures were inadequate." The man was blushing bright red and Sirius began laughing harder, pounding Remus on his back. "I'm afraid, Tonks is pregnant."

"What!" Shadow's mouth dropped open.

"The Ministry will terminate the baby if they find out," Draco said lowly.

That stopped Sirius's laughter in its tracks. "Well, then they won't find out," he vowed.
"The baby may have the werewolf virus," Severus said solemnly. He met and held Remus's eyes. "If that is the case, it will transform during every full moon even while developing in the womb. It will become less and less human with each transformation and perhaps may even tear the womb, killing both it and the mother."

"I don't understand," Shadow said tightly. "I thought the virus was only transferred through a bite."

Severus shook his head. "Through any DNA infusion, actually. The bite is just the most common way. If Remus were to bleed into someone's open wound while he was transformed, they would be infected. Sperm also carries traces of DNA. There is a fifty-fifty chance that Tonks's body will recognize the inhuman DNA and be able to fight it off because it is so small. However, her body might just accept it and allow the fetus to develop with the virus intact. Each month as the baby grows, the virus will replicate. The mother shares blood with the baby. That is how it feeds while in the womb. So as the baby's blood cycles out of the baby and into the mother, her body will become infected as well."

Remus looked devastated. "Madam Pomfrey explained all this to us last night. I tried to get Tonks to abort, but she won't. She's certain the baby will not be a carrier of the virus. Pomfrey detected no trace of the virus so far. She said it was too soon to tell, really, but Tonks is stubborn."

"Oh, Remy," Sirius grasped his best friend's shoulder. "Tonks is strong. She's a Metamorphagus. Her body is very sensitive to genetic changes. It'll get rid of the virus."

"Possibly," Severus agreed.

"I'm sure Pomfrey has her on immune boosters, as well," Draco guessed correctly. The werewolf nodded. "Then there's a chance."

"Thank you, Draco." Remus smiled at the young Slytherin. He straightened and tried to hide his terror and despair. "I'm sure things will be fine. Sometimes you just have to have faith."

Severus snorted but said nothing.

Breakfast was cleared away and Remus snuck out and went to teach his first class. Shadow and Draco went to wake Marissa while Severus retreated to the study dedicated to potions. The sleepy little girl had a room that was identical to the one Shadow woke up in, except it had paintings of Ireland on the walls, magical creatures on the ceiling, and an armoire full of her new clothes. They got her dressed in jeans and a baby-doll blouse and brought her to the dinning room table for her breakfast. Sirius was waiting for them there to meet her.

"Marissa, this is Sirius, my godfather," Shadow told her as he set her down on a chair. She stood and smiled shyly at the dark-haired man. "Hello."

"Hey, Marissa. After breakfast, I was wondering if you wanted to play with me," Sirius asked, hoping the invitation would be accepted. He didn't really have any other ideas for the kid. "I'm kinda bored and these guys plan on getting some work done. How about we have some fun instead?"

Marissa looked over at Shadow and Draco doubtfully.

"You can play with him," Draco reassured her as he took a seat. "I'm sure you'll have fun."

"But don't I got chores? I can help you," she asked anxiously, sitting herself.

Shadow sat on her other side and shook his head. "Not today. We're going to be working with books..."
and papers today."

"Oh." The girl pouted down at her plate.

"Hey. You'll be a big help later, but today is just boring stuff," Draco said softly, stroking her hair.

"Really?" She looked up hopefully at him, her eyes large.

Draco nodded firmly. "Really."

"Okay. I'll play with you, Sirius." She smiled.

Sirius couldn't stop the smile that tugged up his lips as he saw that sweet expression. "Oh, good. I know we'll have lots of fun."

At the older man's mischievous expression, Shadow and Draco exchanged a worried glance over Marissa's head. Shadow hoped he'd made the right decision. Sighing, he sipped on some tea as Marissa had a quick breakfast and then ran off with Sirius to do god knows what.

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Shadow, Draco, and Severus had a very busy day indeed. Shadow explained to them his plan on how to get the locket without revealing or endangering themselves. Severus and Draco had stared at the smug teen and had to admit it was ingenious. Shadow just needed the twins to help him with the finishing touches and they'd be down after dinner.

Still, it took Draco and Shadow the better part of the day getting what they needed together. Severus, meanwhile, was buried in a potions project that he explained he'd been close to finishing before Christmas and he'd like to get it done soon. Shadow asked what it was about, but Severus said he'd tell him when it worked.

Sirius and Marissa appeared every now and then, and sometimes they could hear Marissa's high-pitched laughter and Sirius's deeper, bark-like laugh. None of the Slytherins felt the need to investigate. They figured it couldn't be too bad, and, really, who knows what would happen to them if they tried to interfere. The Animagus was obviously really enjoying his job as babysitter.

That night, when the alarm registered the signal knock, Shadow moved toward the entrance to let Fred and George in. He muttered to himself the whole way. They had to find a way around the Parseltongue. He didn't want to have to come to the door every time someone wanted in, and he really didn't like leaving the passage open to the Forbidden Forest.

A manticore had already come in, investigating the open passage. Shadow smiled, remembering the look of horror on Draco's face when he saw the large creature. Now they had a repelling charm at the door, but it wouldn't repel people since that would be defeating the purpose of leaving the door open in the first place.

"Hey, mate!" Fred called cheerfully after he slide down the slide and landed in front of Shadow.

George was less restrained and just wrapped the smaller teen into a bear hug. "Long time no see!"

"Hey, guys." Shadow smirked. "Care to help me cause panic and mayhem in the halls?"

The twins shared identical evil grins and said together, "Do you really have to ask?"

Shadow laughed and led them into, what they now called, the strategy room. In front of the statue
was a large round table with papers and plans spread out on it. The two green sofa chairs were set over to the side, ready when needed. A pot of tea also sat at the table and Draco poured the twins a cup as Shadow explained his plan.

"Genius! Pure genius!" Fred said in awe, clasping Shadow's shoulder. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"What's so important about the locket?" George asked.

"I just need it," Shadow answered simply. "It's not that I don't trust you, but the fewer people who know about this, the better."

George nodded slowly. "Okay. We understand."

"Good." Shadow lifted his eyebrow at Fred. "So, any ideas for the distraction?"

Fred grinned slowly and began to laugh. "You have no idea! But..." He glanced at his brother. "It will likely get us expelled."

"Not that we care," George explained when Shadow frowned. "We were planning this regardless. Umbitch has it out for us. We breathe wrong and she gives us detention."

Shadow's eyes sharpened. "You okay?"

The twins looked unusually solemn. They were unable to answer.

"Okay. Then lets do this." Shadow silently promised himself that he would make Umbitch pay before she left the castle. "If your mother kicks you out or something drastic, you can stay with us permanently down here, but I'd rather you stay with the Order," Shadow explained, running a hand through his curls. "Your inventions have really helped them out. I'd like that to continue."

The twins nodded. Fred leaned forward to explain their plans. Draco and Shadow listened with wide eyes and soon were laughing. Tomorrow was going to be explosive, that was certain.

xXx

Neville was sitting in History listening to Remus's lecture on how the Muggle World War affected the Wizarding communities when he felt the floor tremble under his feet. Remus fell silent and moved toward the classroom door. He opened it just in time to see a phoenix made of purple and blue fire stream past down the hallway. The students gasped and jumped from their seats. Remus considered making them stay seated, but when another tremor went through the floor, he decided it was best to figure out what was going on.

"Everyone to the Great Hall!" he said loudly. "No stops, walk in a controlled line."

The Fifth-years streamed out into the hall and ducked to the side as a unicorn made of golden light cantered past. Laughs and excited cries went up and soon they were all running after it toward the Great Hall.

"What do you think's happening?" Ron asked.

Neville grinned. "I think the twins have something to do with it."

They made it to the Great Hall in less than ten minutes to see every House gathering there. The teachers were standing in the center and talking loudly and quickly. Neville was tugged to the side by Ron and was led over toward Ginny.
"Have you seen your brothers?" Hermione asked her.

The redhead shrugged. "No. You?"

"No," Ron answered and stood on a bench to scan the crowd.

Everyone was milling around, talking excitedly as more mystical creatures of light ran and flew into the Great Hall, herding students and teachers alike. Once in the room, they circled the ceiling, putting off sparks and smaller fireworks. Everyone was looking up and pointing, eyes bright and grins on their faces. Umbridge was gesturing violently and yelling at McGonagall while that creepy Carrow woman stood at Umbridge's back and just smiled smugly.

"Students, Teachers, we have come to demand an accounting!"

Gasps and shrieks were heard as the colorful animals merged together into a gigantic face. The voice boomed out across the hall making several people cover their ears desperately.

"It's Godric Gryffindor!" Hermione yelled.

"Hogwarts was built as a bastion of light. And Hogwarts, the great light, is dying!"

The face morphed into Rowena Ravenclaw's. "Hogwarts is more than bricks and mortar; where is the love of learning?"

Again the face changed, into Salazar Slytherin's. "Do not forget the true purpose of Hogwarts. Be cunning. Hold to the truth of Hogwarts, even if it must be done secretively."

Last, Helga Hufflepuff smiled down on them. "Hogwarts binds you together as family. Do not let the dark unravel what was meant to be a sanctuary."

The face collapsed inward and then exploded into a huge fireworks display that deafened everyone. Huge blooms of color and sound rocked the Great Hall. Children screamed and gasped in pain and awe. The teachers were casting spells to tame the display, but nothing was working. The ceiling was a maelstrom of magical power and individual spells were merely swept aside. Slowly, after long minutes of glorious explosions of color, they tapered off, leaving the ceiling smeared with soot and the tables coated with ash.

Talk began instantly. Umbridge was so infuriated that she could only sputter. Carrow's smile was gone and instead she stared around her with cold anger, making the students near her back away quickly. Before McGonagall could answer the accusations of the Ministry appointed High Inquisitor, Filch walked in with a Weasley twin in each hand.

"No," Ron gasped and Ginny clutched his hand desperately.

Fred and George had singed sleeves, soot smeared across their nose, and their hair had smoke rising from the tips. Both were wearing shit-eating grins.

"I found them trying to sneak back up to Gryffindor Tower, Miss," Filch said proudly, walking up to Umbridge instead of the Headmistress.

Umbridge practically glowed, she was so ecstatic. "Well, well. I should have known. Yes. You two have always leaned toward dangerous ventures. But this! You've really outdone yourselves time, delinquents."

"Not yet," Fred argued sweetly as George turned toward McGonagall and said, "Headmistress, we
hereby withdraw ourselves from Hogwarts School."

"We find it is no longer providing a worthy education," Fred added, blue eyes burning hatefully as they stared at Umbridge.

"Oh, boys," McGonagall said sadly.

"This changes nothing! They will be punished!" Umbridge shrieked. "They have encouraged rebellious thoughts toward the Ministry and have defied Ministry authority! I will have them arrested at once!"

"I'm afraid we're rather busy," George said with an easy grin.

Simultaneously, the twins lifted wands and cancelled a spell. Brooms immediately unshrunk and appeared in their hands. They kicked free from Filch, their combined effort sending him sliding across the Great Hall floor, nearly reaching the door. Hooting, Fred and George lifted off into the air and dodged the Blasting Curses that Umbridge and Carrow shot at them. Students screamed as huge chunks of stone crumbled as the spells hit the walls instead. They dropped a few more fireworks and shot out of the Great Hall and out of the school, cackling madly and calling goodbye to the cheering students.

"Stop them! Close the wards!" Umbridge demanded, grabbing the Headmistress by her robes.

McGonagall obediently closed her eyes and pretended to do just that. "No. They escaped before I could complete the lockdown. Unfortunately, now we are locked in here with no way to contact the outside. It will take me hours to dismantle them."

Umbridge screamed in frustration and stormed toward her office, Carrow on her heels.

Once the two women were gone, McGonagall smiled at her students. "Everyone return to your House dorms. Classes are canceled for today. I believe you all have a lot to think about."

"Can you believe that?" Hermione hissed, eyes wide as they slowly exited the Great Hall.

"That was amazing!" Dean opinioned.

"Those two rock!" Seamus agreed.

"I hope they're okay," Ron said nervously.

Ginny hugged her brother. "They'll be fine. If anyone can take care of themselves, even against the Ministry, they can."

"Yeah. They always have tricks up their sleeves," Neville reassured.

Ron smiled at them. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. That was some show, wasn't it?"

"And the message," Hermione added. "We really needed to hear that, I think. It's going to get worse before it gets better. We can't forget that we're not alone."

The Gryffindor's nodded and walked back to the Tower feeling strengthened and encouraged by the twins' defiance. They weren't the only ones. Everyone walked a little bit straighter, held their heads higher.

xXx
"Mission accomplished!" Shadow called. He lifted the locket by its delicate chain, his lip curled in disgust.

Draco's head lifted from his own large pile and he grinned. "Great. Let's destroy it now."

Severus stood from his own examinations and nodded. "Yes. Quickly. I don't want you handling it overlong."

"I agree with you there," Shadow muttered, feeling oily magic pulsing from the Horcrux.

He waded carelessly through the Nifflers he'd borrowed from Hagrid yesterday and headed toward the basilisk trunk that contained the basilisk parts they had dissected already. The fangs were stored in there.

The furry Nifflers chattered excitedly as they played with all the shiny treasure they had found. Using secret passages and the Marauders Map, Severus, Draco, and Sirius had traveled through the school letting Nifflers into every teacher's office and private rooms to retrieve anything shiny.

Good thing Shadow had cast a multiplication spell. They had needed the two hundred Nifflers to carry out all the candle stick holders, glasses, quill sharpeners, ink wells, jewelry, watches, and everything else. They had three piles that were as tall as Shadow's waist of stuff due to the fact that they had hit all the teachers to disguise the fact that Umbridge was the real target. Plus, Severus wanted to examine anything they got out of Carrow's office, hoping it could give him a way to get at the vicious woman. The best part was, no one would suspect that they did anything. Everyone would think the twins had done it so they could have things to sell while they lived on the run.

"You have no idea how glad I am that this will be over soon," Shadow murmured at the spinning locket.

Draco opened the case and prepared the fang.

"I think I have to open it first. I stabbed the inside of the dairy to kill it and I don't want to chance it not working," Shadow explained.

"That will release the Dark Lord's influence," Severus murmured, a dark frown marring his features. "I'm not sure that is wise, but I agree. We should try to replicate what you did with the diary as closely as possible."

"I know Seraphim isn't connected to the Dark Lord anymore, but maybe we shouldn't risk you doing this." Draco gripped the fang tightly and glanced at his teacher. "Or you Severus. I'll do it."

Shadow wanted to protest, but that made sense. Since he'd marked Draco and Marissa with the mysterious feather tattoo, he was afraid his connection to Voldemort wasn't as severed as he'd thought. Reluctantly, he nodded. "Do it quick."

Pale but determined, Draco nodded. He accepted the locket and placed it on the small work table they used last year to dissect the basilisk. His right hand clutched the ready fang tightly as his left prepared to open the locket. Shadow and Severus backed off a few feet, their eyes trained on the blond teen.

Draco took a deep breath and maneuvered his nail over the clasp. Closing his finger to pop open the locket, Draco raised the fang high over his head and tensed to lower it. The locket hadn't opened. Heart pounding, tension making his hands and arms tremble, he tried again. Again the locket stayed firmly shut.
"It's spelled," Severus spoke up and walked closer to the foul thing. "In a way, we should be glad. Umbridge was unable to open it and access the Dark Lord's soul shard."

"Can you open it?" Shadow asked anxiously.

"I can. Anyone even slightly versed in Dark magic should know the spell. Umbridge is evil, but she would never stoop to using the Dark unless desperate. She fancies she is a guardian of Light and order."

"And the locket itself was good enough for her. A Pureblood artifact to mark her superiority," Shadow sneered. "She might've even been happy it wouldn't open and reveal a face or a name, proving she had no right to it."

"Are you ready, Draco?" Severus asked, wand raised.

"I know the spell," Draco snapped. "I can do it."

"It would be better if I did," Severus said coldly, eyes burning with threat. "Just plunge the fang down as quickly as you can."

"I'm well aware of what I need to do, Snape." Draco's grey eyes brightened dangerously as he glared at his professor.

"I think it's already affecting us. Do it quickly!" Shadow shouted, startling the two.

Draco nodded and Severus said the Dark unlocking spell. He didn't hear the actual words. His vision narrowed until all that he could see was the locket as it slowly popped open. Invisible rain pelted upward at him, filled with pure Dark magic. He could feel it soaking into his skin and he went tense, a strange invasive pleasure making his muscles twitch.

"I see you, Draco Black. I see your hunger for more power. You want to be the equal, the better, of those around you. You deserve it! I can give you that power," a seductive voice whispered in his ear.

Draco shook his head. He was supposed to plunge the fang down. Pierce the locket. He had to.

"You will be great. They will all admire you. And your lover... He will learn to depend on you. He will trust that you are strong enough to keep up. He would be so pleased, Draco. How can you be anything less than his equal?"

"Draco! Stab it! What are you waiting for!"

The voice came from so far away. Shaking, confused, Draco shook his head again. He wanted to step away. He wanted to snatch the locket up. Paralyzed, he stood frozen in place.

"Oh, sweet Draco. You could be so much greater than you are. And you would have the power to protect the ones you love. You've failed in that, haven't you, Draco? You lost your mother. Don't lose your lover. Can you protect him as you are? I think not. Take me up. Take the power to keep him safe or his death will be on your hands."

"Draco! Please. Kill it! Do it now!"

Draco glanced to the side at the urgency of that voice, but then back at the locket. He couldn't look away. Darkness swelled in him and pulled him in. He took a step forward, his arm lowering slowly. He needed the locket. But... There was something wrong. Something pounded at the back of his mind. Suddenly, a snap-shot of feeling, sight, and thought broke through the spell ensnaring him.
He remembered that night with Seraphim. The winged creature with glowing green eyes and animal-like facial features. He remembered the Black caressing his skin, making him arch with desire as it shivered along his nerves. The Black was so much purer than the Dark magic scrabbling at him now, so much sweeter than that voice hissing in his ear.

With a hoarse cry, Draco let his arm fall completely. A horrible scream pierced the air as the fang plunged into the inky darkness within the locket. Draco was flung off his feet. He collapsed onto his side. The Dark magic tattered and evaporated as if it had never been, leaving Draco shaking and horrified at how close he’d come to succumbing to Voldemort and betraying Shadow.

"Dray…” Shadow stood, finally releasing his father who had tried to attack Draco to protect the locket. Severus still had some control of himself and had not resorted to magic, but he’d physically lunged at Draco before Shadow grabbed ahold of his robes. Shadow stood and hurried over to the sobbing teen. "Draco, hey…”

Draco swung out, trying to keep Shadow away from him.

Determined, Shadow knelt and pulled him half into his lap. "Draco. You did it. You did it; it's over."

"He almost had me!” Draco screamed at him, yanking away.

"But he didn't get you," Shadow told him firmly. "You beat him. How many other people can say the same? How many other people would have the strength to do what you just did?"

Draco shook his head, his dyed hair swinging in front of his face.

"Dray." Shadow scooted over and wrapped his arms around him again. "You did it." He grinned against his love's neck. "It's destroyed. Forever."

Draco laughed and brought his hand up, cradling the back of Shadow's head. He was still shaking, but the absolute disgust slowly spilled from him as Shadow held him tight. "Thank Merlin."

Shadow laughed and pulled away. He glanced over at his father who was getting to his feet. "You okay, Dad?"

Severus's eyes flashed up in surprise. Very rarely did Shadow call him father. "I am well."

Shadow stood and helped Draco to his feet. He cast a subtle charm to clean Draco’s face of tears, but he was still pale and shaky. “You okay, Draco?"

"I'm fine,” he rasped. "That was… intense."

"Yeah. Wasn't exactly how it went down with the diary,” Shadow admitted ruefully.

"Perhaps because the shard had already manifested," Severus conjectured. He straightened his robes and looked over the two teens. "I recommend we go to dinner. Marissa and Sirius are most likely anxious to hear of our success."

Draco nodded and walked forward toward the back doorway that led to the dining room. As he passed Severus, his teacher put a hand on his shoulder. He looked up with wary eyes.

"You did very well," Severus said evenly, holding his gaze.

Draco flushed. "Thank you, sir."

Shadow smiled fondly at them. Motion to the right caught his attention and he glanced over to see a
Gryffindor walking over from between two pillars. He frowned severely. "Godric."

Severus and Draco turned around, wands held discreetly at their side.

"I have something for you. It is the last thing left by Headmaster Dumbledore. I was to give it to you when I sensed the destruction of a Horcrux within these walls." The serious teen reached out expectantly.

With a deep sigh, Shadow lifted his hand, palm up. Godric dropped a golden snitch into his palm and disappeared. Severus and Draco hurried to his side and stared down at the innocent looking instrument. Turning and tugging on it didn't reveal anything special about the small ball and Shadow rolled his eyes.

"Yes. Thank you. Very helpful, I'm sure," he said dryly.

"Let me see it." Severus snatched the thing from him and stared at it.

After several moments of nothing happening, Draco shrugged. "Maybe it's on a timer."

"Maybe." Shadow ran his hands through his hair furiously. "That man drives me batty, I swear. Let's go eat."

Severus trailed behind the two teens, still examining the snitch. Now he was muttering at it, his wand circling and poking the metal surface.

"Shadow! Draco! Did you beat the bad guy?" Marissa asked, bouncing on her knees at her seat.

"Draco did," Shadow told her proudly.

Sirius grinned at his adopted Heir. "Good job. Wish I could've seen it!"

"It's a good thing you didn't," Shadow shook his head as Draco accepted the exuberant hug from the little girl. "It wasn't anything she needed to see. I'm glad you stayed with her."

Sirius nodded, still unhappy at not being able to witness the destruction of the Horcrux. "Well, let's celebrate! Omi!"

The elf cracked into view. "Yes, sir?"

"We just kicked old Voldie in the shorts! We want a good celebration dinner!"

"Yes, sir!" the elf squeaked excitedly before disappearing.

Draco laughed at Sirius's behavior and settled in a chair with Marissa on his lap. He held her close, still not fully recovered from his near miss with the Dark Lord. Had he taken up the locket he wouldn't be sitting here right now. Not like this. He wouldn't be hugging Marissa or smiling at Shadow. He wouldn't be smirking at Severus who was lost in his own world, oblivious to everything around him as he examined the snitch. He would have been lost.

Plates appeared before them and Marissa burst into excited laughter. The steaks had sparklers sticking out of them, the mash potatoes flashed all different colors, and the peas waltz around both. Draco snorted and then he was laughing, too.

Shadow rolled his eyes, although privately he was very glad to hear Draco laughing, and mock glared at his godfather. "Oh, well done, Sirius. Now we'll get motion sick while eating dinner. Brilliant idea."
"It was, wasn't it?" Sirius sighed happily and scooped up some potatoes while they were pink.

"Those were my idea," Marissa admitted with a grin. "Sirius was the one to make the peas dance."

"They're very pretty," Shadow admitted and took a bite himself when the potatoes were a peach color. His eyes widened. They tasted like a peach, too!

Marissa giggled at his expression. "I wanted dessert for dinner, so Mister Omi said he'd make it taste like dessert. The colors tell you which pie they taste like!"

"What a fabulous idea," Draco said and took a big bite when it flashed blue. "Mmm, blueberry."

xXx

The rest of the week did not go well once the Horcrux was destroyed. Umbridge was beyond furious at the theft of every shiny thing in her room. Her temper was made worse by the twins being apparently out of her reach. Minister Fudge was swamped and struggling to deal with the populace. He didn't have time to send the Aurors searching for two delinquents. The expulsion would have to be the worst of their punishment. He did promise to put a mark in their files that would ensure they would never be employed by a Ministry-run business.

Enraged that her revenge had been thwarted, Umbridge came down hard on any student who so much as breathed wrong. She became a tyrant that rivaled the sheer amount of hate and terror Snape had inflicted while being a professor. In fact, she was worse since she still tortured children in her detentions with the blood quill. Everyone was on their best behavior around her, hardly daring to look the woman in the eyes.

The rise in tension within the school was echoed by those occupying the chambers underneath Hogwarts. Omi managed to acquire several newspapers every morning and none of them had anything good to report. The persistent and increasing fog had been revealed to be the Dementors breeding. There were a sudden rash of Muggles slipping into comas after having their souls eaten. Muggles feared it was some kind of virus or reaction to something and they were beginning to truly panic. Some were fleeing the English Isles as crime rates were skyrocketing in both worlds.

The Muggle Prime Minister was demanding something be done. The Wizarding community demanded the Boy-Who-Lived. Fudge had claimed Harry Potter was being trained secretly under their supervision and he was running out of reasons why the teen hero wasn't making an appearance. Aurors and Order members were doing their best, but the Death Eaters were not making any reckless moves. They were still lying low, only letting the flunkies within reach of the authorities.

Severus was still cloistered away working on his mysterious potions project. Sirius and Marissa entertained themselves and worked on the snitch. Shadow and Draco were assigned the task of trying to find out where the other Horcruxes were.

They speculated Voldemort wanted to make seven. The seventh was going to be formed using Harry's death as a baby. Since Harry hadn't died, the Horcrux was only half-formed, thus creating the concentrated energy that formed Demon. Salazar insisted that when Boy merged with Demon, Boy's White magic had purified the soul, destroying the last traces of Voldemort.

That left six completed Horcruxes still in existence:

One was used to resurrect the Dark Lord this summer after Demon destroyed him in the cemetery. Severus suspected it was the Gaunt family ring that was used, since the ring was missing from the Gaunt hut and the defenses had been professionally dismantled.
Harry had destroyed the diary three years ago.

Draco destroyed the locket.

That left three Horcruxes. One made from a relic of Helga Hufflepuff, a relic of Rowena Ravenclaw, and the last Voldemort's snake, Nagini.

The problem was they had no idea what relics of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to look for. It was worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack. On top of that, even if they did know which relics, they had no idea where they could be found. They were basically at ground zero once again.

Draco wouldn’t let that stop him from making sure his love survived the war. He’d make sure Shadow had as many tricks up his sleeves as possible. One of those tricks included learning how to harness Seraphim’s power.

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"You'd be stupid not to use anything you can to protect yourself!" Draco bellowed furiously.

Shadow sneered at him. "I'd be stupid to think I can use Seraphim." He shoved past his friend and stormed back toward the private studies.

Draco followed hot on his heels. "Seph already killed the Dark Lord once. What are you going to do? Carry around a fang and try to stab the bastard?"

"If I have to!" Shadow retorted and picked up his pace. "It'd be more sane than what you're suggesting! I'm just not power-blind to see it!"

"I'm hardly power hungry!" Draco yelled, deeply insulted. "But even if I were, at least I'm not a bloody coward!"

Shadow turned and practically snarled before slamming the door in his face.

xXx

Shadow grimaced as he crept along the corridor. Most everyone was in the Great Hall for lunch, so there was no one around to catch him. Still, where he was going was not somewhere he wanted to be. If there were any other way, Shadow would have taken it, but they were out of options. People were dying and they had no leads.

"Professor? Are you here?" He carefully pushed open the door to classroom eleven and stepped inside. He pulled off his Invisibility Cloak and called again. "Professor Firenze?"

The centaur stepped out of the glamoured forest with surprising grace and folded his legs in the small clearing that constituted the classroom. He gestured at a spot across from him and Shadow sat carefully.

"You seek guidance, Troubled One," Firenze rumbled in his deep, rich voice. His large brown eyes stared at Shadow compassionately, his long mane of hair fell over his broad shoulders.

"I don't know where to look for the Horcruxes," Shadow admitted, feeling himself flush with shame, but also anger. "I can't do this by myself. I need help. You said you went against your herd to help me."

"You were given the key to the answers you seek." Firenze's tail flicked with agitation. "You still do
"Please!" Shadow cried, leaping to his feet. He stretched his hands before him almost desperately. "I don't know what that means. I'm sorry I'm not doing things right, but I'm trying!"

"Be still. Sit with me. Be calm."

Shadow wanted to scream, but when he met the watchful eyes of the centaur, he knew he was being tested somehow. Taking a deep breath, he sank to the ground again and closed his eyes. The breathing exercises Severus taught him to stem panic attacks came to mind and he began to follow the pattern almost instinctively.

Images from the papers of innocent Dementor victims and permanent fogs slowly faded from his mind. The mobs and rallies calling for Harry Potter with fearful desperation were harder to banish, but they eventually released him. His guilt over the suffering of the students due to the distraction he had requested slowly rose off his shoulders. It all faded into the back of his mind. His emotions quieted until he was utterly calm. Only then did he open his eyes.

"The Broken One left you something to help unravel the puzzle of the Soulless Lord. All things have a beginning, and all things must return to their beginning in order to reach their end. You have the tools and the ability to overcome this problem, for this problem lies without." Firenze's voice washed over him, sparking images of the golden snitch, of snakes eating their tails, of crops to be planted and harvested. "Tell me, Troubled One, which darkness do you truly need assistance navigating."

Shadow stiffened as he suddenly remembered the last visit he'd had with the professor. Firenze had provoked him into confronting what Draco and he felt for one another. The centaur had warned him that darkness and war were coming, but he had not offered help with that path. Frowning severely, he said, "You offer guidance with my inner path."

Firenze snorted and Shadow could feel the warm gust of air against his face. "Shadowed, Chosen, Troubled, Blessed, Bringer of Darkness and Light… You, child, have a difficult burden to bear. You embody contradiction. Shiva walking another coil through mortality. I cannot Guide you. You do not need Guidance. You need clear vision. I will assist you with this."

Dismayed beyond belief, Shadow stared at the centaur. "I'm supposed to reconcile these differences? Are you saying if I don't, then we'll lose to Voldemort?"

"There is no resolution," Firenze said gently. "No compromise. No balance. That is not your path, child. You are Black. You are White. You are male. You are female. Never both. Always one. Always another. You are contradiction."

Shadow shook his head mutely. He had no idea what he was being told, but he could feel a building pressure against his skin. Magic was being drawn to this moment of Truth, almost like a prophecy was being spoken, and he could only wish desperately for Firenze to stop.

"You are Change Bringer," the centaur rumbled like thunder. "So bring change. Do not force yourself to fit the World's pattern. Change the patterns of the World. That is why we cannot foretell the end of this war. Nothing is certain as long as you continue to exist. You change the patterns as you should. Your destiny is to change those around you."

Shadow stared helplessly at the centaur. What kind of fate was that? A life forever in chaos.

"Child." Firenze bowed so that their faces were close. "Had you not written your father, where would he be?"
"How would I know?" Shadow snapped defensively, not pleased with where this was going.

"He'd be a spy for the Broken One, at the mercy of the Soulless Lord. And your young mate? Where would he be had you not touched him?" the centaur pressed. "He'd feel like he had to try and do what his father wanted. It would have taken him longer to realize he didn't want to be an agent of Darkness. Maybe it would have even been too late."

"That's not true," Shadow protested futilely. "Draco would never have chosen that path."

"He would have tried," Firenze said gently. "Without you, the fledgling would still reside within darkness and pain. And without you, the Man of Earth? He'd never have broken free of the magical prison he'd confined himself within. You opened his path away from despair and early death."

Shadow flushed. He was deeply disturbed. "That's not because of me! They chose their fates themselves."

"They did, but you sparked the change. You made it happen quicker. You opened their eyes to the paths already there, granted them the power of Choice. You are of Light but also Darkness," Firenze murmured, eyes staring unblinking. "Your existence fueled the madness within your mate's father. You inspire the Soulless Lord, focus his efforts and sharpen his thoughts. Your existence provided the Broken One fertile ground for his delusions of power to grow and overcome his morals. You make those under the Fire Bird question their path and reveal the darkness cast by fire's light within their own hearts."

Shadow ran his hand through his hair roughly. "I don't understand."

"Do not deny your essence. There is no changing the very fiber of your soul. Embrace what you are." Firenze stood and raised his hands. "Your star is bright. It burns across the sky and will be fixed forever regardless of the outcome on Earth. Your star will travel across the sky and cross the paths of constellations and planets that rule over men and beasts. And when it does, a change in fortune will be in their immediate future. You are a sign of change. You bring change by your very existence."

Shadow didn't understand, not really, but he could feel along the outline of the idea the centaur was trying to express. Basically, he understood that his very existence put him in a position to do things others couldn't. Everything lined up in a way to give him power to tip things into motion one way or the other. Firenze was saying, Changes things. Upset the established patterns. Shadow wasn't sure how to do that. He was just himself. He was aware of the power of his name, of his birth, of his magic, but was unsure how to use them or control the changes his existence sparked in others. He had a feeling that he wasn't ready to understand. Firenze was just preparing him. That the centaur’s words would make more sense later.

Getting to his feet, Shadow bowed deeply. "Thank you," he said softly. He was as confused as ever, he hadn't gained a direction, but nevertheless he knew he'd been given a gift. The centaurs words were wise beyond what he could see now. It wasn't Firenze's fault that he couldn't understand.

Firenze lowered his head in return with a soft indulgent smile and disappeared among the shadows cast by the illusionary trees once more.

xXx

Draco was stressed. Marissa had been bugging him to play with her all morning and Shadow had disappeared for two hours yesterday, which really worried him. Shadow was usually level-headed, but there were times when he’d do something reckless and foolhardy. There was some Gryffindor in him, after all, but he wasn't talking to Draco, not since their last fight.
"Honey. I'm really busy," he said for the fifth time.

The little girl pouted up at him. "Sirius is too busy to play, too. You haven't played with me in ages."

Draco ran his hands through his hair with a sigh, knowing she was right, but that didn't change the fact he was busy. "We're really trying to figure this thing out, sweetie." He gestured to the damned snitch sitting innocently on the table in front of him.

Marissa cast her eyes downward. "Okay."

Of course this made Draco wince. It wasn't the girl's fault she was cooped up with them and that tempers were beginning to run short. She was just a little girl and was bored. He stood and offered his hand. She immediately took it, her brown eyes bright with hope. "Come on. Maybe a break would be good. Let's go see what Shadow's doing."

"Okay!" she said more excitedly.

They walked through the rooms slowly, pretending like they were stalking prey. Sirius had taught Marissa this game and she insisted Draco play with her. Shrugging, the blond crouched and pretended to hunt for Shadow, smiling when Marissa giggled. They moved cautiously until all the rooms were searched. No Shadow. Draco was beginning to worry that his best friend had disappeared again when they entered the main hall where the basilisk remains rested. Shadow was bent over the corpse, working mechanically, his expression distant.

Marissa pounced and attacked his legs, making the teen stagger, but he looked down at her with a smile.

"Hey. What're you two doing?"

"Draco's taking a break. Can you play with us?" she asked hopefully.

"You know what, maybe playing is exactly what we need to do," Shadow answered thoughtfully.

Draco frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?" He crossed his arms over his chest. His annoyance skyrocketed at the silent treatment he was getting. Shadow wasn't explaining himself at all. Not where he went yesterday, not why he'd been in such a funky mood. Nothing. It was really starting to piss him off.

Shadow met his eyes. The two-colored orbs were reserved and tired, but there was a determination shimmering in them as well. "I want to go talk to Rogan and the others. I think I've figured out a way for people to come and go from the Chamber. Trusted people of course. The wards we had Godric devise over their bedrooms only do so much. They should have a place to go if they really need to be out of Carrow and Umbridge's reach."

"Have you told Severus?" Draco asked, arching his eyebrow.

"No. He's busy. Besides, I don't need his permission." Shadow glared at him, reminding his friend he was still mad at him. "Are you coming with me or not?"

"What if you get caught by a teacher or McGonagall?"

"I'll deal with it." He ran a hand through his curls, frustrated. "I'm tired of hiding. I'm ready to confront some of these people."

"And Marissa?"
"She can come. She needs to get out of here for a while, too." Shadow smiled down at the girl who was listening patiently to their discussion.

As soon as she had his attention, she smiled brightly but also nervously. Strangers put her on edge and this place was the best place she had ever been. It was safe, and warm, and fun. It was strange and magical. Sirius had told her that there was a big castle above them and it was a school filled with lots of kids. Her mother had told her she'd have to go to pre-school next year, so she was curious what that meant.

Draco nodded, resigned. He knew he'd made the right decision when Shadow smiled at him. It was such a happy and unguarded expression that it momentarily took his breath away.

"Thank you," Shadow said softly. Then he turned and smiled at the little girl. He offered her his hand. "You ready to explore?"

Marissa immediately nodded, sending her thick copper curls bouncing around her shoulders.

They made their way to the slide and Shadow hissed for it to open. The stone rippled until the slide transformed into a long staircase. They made the long climb up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Draco had to carry Marissa most of the way. He carefully warned the girl about the ghost and told her not to be scared.

"I'm not scared," Marissa answered solemnly. Her hand rose to rest against her collarbone. "The angel will always save me."

Draco nodded agreement to this statement.

Shadow scowled down at him.

Draco shrugged to say, 'what can I do?' It wasn't a bad thing that Marissa felt safe and protected. He couldn't tell her that it might not be true when it made her feel safe to believe in her 'angel'. Besides, either way Shadow, Seraphim, or Draco would always be there to save her. Hell, Sirius and Severus, too, had come to care for the child. So her faith wasn't exactly misplaced.

Since it was Monday and everyone was in their last classes, Shadow and Draco decided to wait in Rogan's bedroom for the Fourth-year to arrive. The common room was too risky and so was wandering the halls. The bedroom was at least warded to subtly influence anyone of ill intent to go somewhere else.

Marissa's eyes were wide with curiosity and fear as they walked through the empty stone corridors. The paintings moved and whispered, there were suits of armor and old weapons. The common room was huge, and she itched to touch everything. However, the most impressive thing she saw was the window that looked into the lake once they arrived at Rogan's room.

"So are you going to talk to me?" Draco asked quietly while the little girl was plastered to the window, looking for mermaids.

"Eventually." Shadow smiled wryly. "I haven't really been able to make sense of what Professor Firenze told me."

"Is that who you snuck out to see yesterday?" Draco asked casually, but his eyes narrowed. He vividly recalled Shadow's last meeting with the centaur and he did not like to think the creature had put his hands all over Shadow again. Plus, he seems to have upset his friend once more. "What did he have to say?"
"A lot. Basically, he can't help me with Voldemort, I mean, Tom," he corrected when Draco flinched. He rolled his eyes. "Anyway, he did say he could help me become comfortable with who I am. Another therapist, I guess."

"You haven't talked to Severus like that in a while," Draco noted.

"I'll talk to Severus later," Shadow reassured him. "I'm just not ready yet. I'm still thinking about things. Besides, it's not like he'll help your case. He doesn't think messing around with Seraphim is a good idea, either."

"We'll see," Draco said darkly. "We haven't heard Salazar's report yet."

Shadow ignored that. He didn't want to renew the fight. He was beginning to miss Draco's input and company. "I'm getting restless. It doesn't feel right, sitting on the sidelines like this. I want to be more involved. I almost want to come back to Hogwarts."

"No," Draco said flatly, his eyes cold. "We can work behind the scenes, but under no circumstances are you putting yourself within reach of Carrow or Umbridge."

Shadow didn't say anything to this and Draco felt his temper rise. He was about to say something more pointed when the door opened behind them and Rogan stepped in. Shadow's eyes brightened when Rogan enthusiastically pulled him into a hug.

"Shadow!"

"Hey. Things better now?" Shadow asked once the teen released him.

Rogan Harper was the leader of the little triad he formed with Miles and Lillian. Though Lillian could be very domineering, he was the more decisive of the three. He'd taken Miles under his wing and Lillian was his co-conspirator. Once he opened up to Shadow, he'd sort of adopted him as well into his little circle of friends. That meant something to both of them.

"Within our rooms," Rogan agreed but then shook his head. "Not outside them. Things are getting pretty desperate."

"What's happened?" Shadow asked worriedly and looked the teen over. Rogan looked the same: shoulder length auburn hair, watchful hazel eyes that hid a hot temper, and a pale complexion. He looked maybe a little thinner and his face was a bit strained, but nothing too major. However, he was a Slytherin, and the lack of physical evidence didn't necessarily mean anything.

"Lillian won a duel last night against Tracey Davis." Rogan's eyes cut over to Draco. "Your year, I believe."

Draco nodded.

"Anyway, she told me what Carrow is teaching the winners. Knott just uses the loser for target practice, but Carrow… She's teaching the winners Dark Arts. But not normal spells. She's teaching the addicting ones and makes them practice them."

Draco and Shadow stood grimly silent. They'd wondered what Carrow was doing. They knew it was bad, but this was truly awful. She was addicting minors and forcing them to crave a power that could easily slip out of control. Marissa, feeling the tension, came over and pressed herself into Draco's legs.

"Who's this?" Rogan asked, looking down at her in surprise.
"Marissa," Shadow introduced, "this is Rogan Harper. My friend."

"Hi," she said quietly and pressed her face into Draco's thigh. He stroked her hair gently.

"We sort of rescued her and now she's stays with us in the Chamber," Shadow explained.

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Rogan's eyes went wide. He was a First-year when the basilisk had been set loose, just like Ginny. "Really?" It was every Slytherin's dream to see the Chamber.

Shadow smiled. He'd forgotten that he'd get that reaction. "Yeah. Seems like my father knew how to get in all along. He's hiding us there since not even the Headmistress has access to it."

"Wicked." Rogan grinned. "Miles is going to love this."

The fragile, scholarly teen certainly would. "I wanted to invite you down whenever it's safe for you to slip away. Also if there's an emergency and you have to get away, I want you to know where it is."

Rogan nodded seriously. "Thank you."

Shadow waved that away, a frown on his face. "How is Miles? He's not sick, is he?" His brittle bones condition made him extra vulnerable to physical assault. He hoped that wasn't being used against him.

"He's not a Slytherin for nothing," Rogan boasted with a grin, but it didn't reach his eyes. "We're all holding it together as best we can."

"I guess that will have to do for now," Shadow said, clearly unsatisfied.

"I should get down to dinner," Rogan reluctantly murmured when he noticed the time. "Carrow will know I'm missing. I just came up to drop off my books."

"I'll stop by again tomorrow night with a charmed pendant. It will get you into the Chamber. Use it only in emergencies or if you're certain you won't be missed, caught, or followed," Shadow instructed.

"I understand." Rogan gave his friend one more hug before slipping out of the room.

Draco lifted an eyebrow. "What pendant?"

"We'll have to make some," Shadow flashed him a cheeky grin. "Now come on. We only have while they're at dinner."

"To do what?" Draco demanded as Shadow left.

Marissa followed happily since Shadow was creeping along and she thought it was another game. Shadow put a finger over his lips and winked at her.

Draco's frown deepened when they went in the opposite direction as the Chamber. It took him only five minutes to realize Shadow was sneaking up to Gryffindor Tower. He groaned silently and rolled his eyes. Why must Shadow do such crazy things? But he was committed, so he kept his eyes open and his senses alert. His wand was ready to stun anyone who happened upon them. Luckily, Shadow had timed it right and they arrived without discovery.

"A little one!" the Fat Lady said, startled.
"Hello. We really need to see Neville Longbottom. It's kind of important. We don't want to be caught by Carrow or Umbridge."

"I dare say," the Fat Lady agreed. She looked them over very unhappily. "I'm not supposed to let people in without the password."

"I'm aware, but I solemnly swear that I will do no harm to any student or Hogwarts herself," Shadow coaxed.

Marissa added to the plea with a quiet, "Please, ma'am. I want to see a real lion's den."

The painting smiled down at the young child and caved. "Very well." The portrait swung open onto a worn common room with a multitude of red and gold pillows and couches. It was opulent and luxurious, but not at all elegant the way Slytherin's common room was decorated.

"Wow," Marissa breathed. "It's beautiful."

"A little Gryffindor in the making," Shadow said with a laugh.

"Hardly!" Draco snapped, scandalized. "She's Slytherin through and through!"

"If telling yourself that helps you sleep at night…" Shadow shrugged with twinkling eyes.

Motion to the right drew his eyes and they widened dramatically. Ron and Hermione were pressed into a corner, making out heavily. The redhead's hand was up her shirt and Hermione had both hands buried in his hair. Beyond shocked, Shadow approached cautiously. Their mouths worked furiously and the smacking noises and moans softly filled the air. Shadow grimaced, his stomach churning. He honestly thought he might be sick.

"Sorry to interrupt, but can you not do that," he pleaded, horrified that he and Draco may look like that when they kissed.

The two Gryffindors broke apart with dismayed gasps. Both their faces turned bright red, their chests rising and falling quickly as they struggled to catch their breaths.

"Ugh," Draco grunted in disgust, his lip curled in disdain.

Shadow felt a bit better that he shared his feelings but still felt very uncomfortable. He shifted his gaze away toward Marissa who was oblivious and bouncing on a battered red couch happily.

"Shadow! Draco!" Hermione finally broke out of her shock enough to speak. "What are you doing here?"

Ron was frantically trying to set his clothes to rights; Hermione followed his lead and nervously tried to flatten her wild hair.

"I wanted to know when you had DA meetings. Thought you'd be at lunch, that I'd just wait for Ron in his room." He still couldn't bring himself to look them in the eye.

"What are you doing at Hogwarts? Where did you go after the Ministry? The Order has been frantic trying to find you and Snape!" Hermione ran right over his answer. "We were so worried!"

She came toward him to give him a hug, but Shadow quickly sidestepped her. His skin crawled and cold sweat broke out over his forehead and on his palms. Her eyes went wide and filled with tears. Ron's face turned redder, his fists clenching furiously.
Draco quickly cut in, trying to distract them both from his friend. "Aren't you dating Krum, Granger?"

Hermione blushed and covered her mouth in shame, her tears spilling free down her hot cheeks.

Ron moved from the wall and shoved Draco hard. "What's it to you, Ferret? Mind your own bloody business!"

Marissa gasped at this display of violence and cried out, "Draco!" She ran over to the Slytherin, but Shadow caught her and lifted her to his hip.

"Okay. Everyone stop," he said sharply, forcing himself to calm down and push everything else away. "Ron, you're right. What you two do is none of our business. Hermione, stop crying. We really don't care either way. It was just a shock to see. Why don't you wash your face or something and then we'll talk."

She nodded her head jerkily and ran up stairs toward the girl’s dorms. Ron stood with his arms crossed over his chest and scowled at Draco. Draco returned the glare with interest. Shadow stepped between them and introduced Marissa. Ron's expression softened as the little girl waved at him shyly.

The four of them moved over to the couch Marissa had previously been bouncing on. Shadow and Draco sat with Marissa between them. Ron took a seat in a sofa chair near them. The Slytherins sat silently as Ron described things that were happening around school.

The DA had grown exponentially, and everyone was very careful around both Carrow and Umbridge. Umbridge was still giving painful detentions, but Carrow just creeped them out with her hungry smiles and the way she described the awful things potions could do. Most of what she taught was borderline Dark, but not quite illegal, so McGonagall couldn't say anything about it.

Hermione came downstairs, her robes in place and her face clean. She sat across from Ron in a similar sofa chair. Her head was held high, but a blush still stained her cheeks as she folded her hands primly in her lap. "So, Shadow, tell us what you've been up to. Where have you been? What are you doing? We didn't really have time to talk before going into the Ministry, but what happened to you after you and Draco were taken from Grimmauld Place? Are you okay? What are you doing here at Hogwarts? Is the Ministry still out for you? Does the Headmistress know?"

"Hermione, slow down," Shadow said with a smile. Her blush deepened, but she met his gaze steadily. "The Ministry isn't after me anymore, but Draco is still wanted for questioning regarding the incident at St. Mungo's, thus his new look." He waved his hand at the former blond and Draco smirked.

"I had to look twice to recognize you," Hermione admitted. "You did a good job. I don't sense magic, though."

"It's completely non-magical." Shadow grinned at her. "We went to a Muggle spa and salon. You should see Severus!"

"Really?" She smiled. "I'd love to hear the details."

"Is this really pertinent?" Draco scowled at them both. "We're here for a reason, remember?"

Shadow allowed the change in subject. He didn't especially want to die slowly. Marissa huddled deeper into his side at Draco's murderous look. "I want to attend DA meetings. I could use the practice dueling."
Hermione nodded and fished something out of her pocket. She handed him a magically enhanced galleon. "We never plan too far ahead of time, as we don't want word to spread to the wrong people. I put a different time every morning. Those that can show up, do. Between Ron, Ginny, and I, we try to have at least one of us at each session to keep a record of what's being taught and to set up drills. Slytherins have stopped coming. Neville explained that it's because Professor Carrow is breathing down their necks and watching their every move. So we try to take notes of what we do and pass them over to Rogan Harper secretly in the halls. He's the Slytherin representative."

"That's really great that you do that," Shadow said approvingly.

Seeing that they were going to be talking for awhile, Marissa wiggled off the couch and ran to explore the room further. Draco watched her out of the corner of his eye to make sure she didn't get into anything she shouldn't. Who knew what Gryffindorks would leave lying around.

"Thanks for this. I'll try to make as many sessions as I can." Shadow slipped the coin into his pocket.

"What's going on?" Hermione insisted. "You still haven't said."

"We're staying in the Chamber secretly. McGonagall knows Draco, Sirius, Severus, and Marissa are down there, but she hasn't seen me. I'm sure she suspects, but it's not like she can go down there to check. Only I can open the door. As for what happened to us after we left Grimmauld Place, I'd rather not say. Draco and I were fine, though. And it's over, so don't worry about it."

"If you're not on the Ministry wanted list, why don't you come back to classes, mate?" Ron asked with a frown.

"It's not exactly safe," Shadow explained wryly. "Officially the pursuit has been stopped, but unofficially I wouldn't put it past Umbridge to grab me and do something drastic."

"You've got a point," Ron agreed.

"Well, I'm very glad you're here now." Hermione smiled brightly. "It's good to see you're all right. Things have been crazy out there." She reached over and he let her pat his hand.

"Thanks." He cast the Tempus charm and saw there was only ten minutes left of dinner. "We should go. People are going to be in the halls soon and we have to sneak back to the Chamber. Tell Neville hello for me."

"Sure," Ron promised.

"See you tomorrow?" Hermione pressed anxiously. Every time Harry disappeared from her sight, she worried it would be the last time she was going to see him.

"Definitely." Shadow smiled. They collected Marissa and, with a final wave from Shadow, the three slipped back into the halls. Marissa thanked the portrait, and they made their way quickly toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Cutting it a bit close, don't you think?" Draco hissed when they landed safely at the bottom of the slide. They had almost been caught, but they had dodged into the bathroom just as a talking trio had turned the corner into the hallway.

Shadow shrugged. They hadn't been caught so it was a moot point. Marissa went running past the basilisk. She was calling excitedly for Sirius. She wanted to tell him all about the lion's den. It had been exactly as he had described it. Shadow and Draco exchanged a glance, knowing they were going to be in trouble when Severus heard about their excursion.
Shadow knew that even though Draco didn't approve, he would stand by him and defend his decision to Severus. That knowledge made a tingling warmth spread through his chest. They may not always agree, but against adversity Draco would always side with Shadow. Draco scowled at his friend's knowing smile, but his expression was wiped clean when Shadow grabbed his hand and squeezed it gently.

"Thank you," Shadow said for the second time that day.

Draco sighed, his anger disappearing as if it'd never been. He was going soft! "Don't mention it," he said seriously.

Shadow laughed. "Don't worry, Serpentine. I'd never dream of damaging your badass reputation."

Draco scowled.

Chapter end.
Birds Of A Feather

Shadow woke Tuesday morning and immediately looked at the charmed galleon. Deciphering the letters and numerals around the edge, he saw that Hermione scheduled the DA meeting at ten o'clock that night. He was slightly disappointed that he'd have to wait so long, but he understood the importance of keeping the club secret from Umbridge and Carrow.

After washing and getting dressed, he made his way to the dinning room. Everyone was present except Severus. The man hardly made any meals, instead eating alone or skipping for all Shadow knew. The Potions Master was so wrapped up in whatever he was doing that it wouldn't surprise Shadow in the least. He felt a twinge of disappointment and abandonment, but he quickly let it pass. He knew whatever Severus was working on had to be important.

"Morning," Draco drawled, his eyes watchful.

Shadow smiled at him, glad their fight was finally over.

"Good morning, Shadow," Marissa called. She rubbed at her eyes sleepily and leaned against Sirius. The Animagus ruffled her hair and whispered in her ear, making her eyes go wide and bright before giggling. Shadow smiled at them and took the seat next to his boyfriend. Draco leaned over and gently brushed Shadow's cheek with the back of his hand. Surprised, Shadow turned to look at him and saw the grey eyes dark with desire and affection. He swallowed hard and focused on the breakfast that appeared before them.

Seeing Ron and Hermione had reminded him again of the past and Lockhart. He was still raw from the memories and squirmed uneasily at the thought of sexual pleasure. The only times he'd been able to get past his aversion was when it was spontaneous and so passionate that he'd no room to think of anything except the moment.

Draco frowned at his friend, seeing the tension in his shoulders, but before he could plan a way to get Shadow to tell him whatever was bothering him, a phantom appeared beside the table. Shadow tensed even further, and Draco reached under the table to squeeze his leg. Shadow's hand rested on top of it and squeezed back. Draco was just pleased that the brunet didn't remove it.

"I've finished my evaluation, if you'd like to hear the details," Salazar said with a grimace. He hated having to be so polite, especially when he had important information to discuss. Patience was never a virtue he'd mastered.

"Come on, Marissa," Sirius said as he stood. "Let's put our plan into action. Omi won't know what hit him."

"Okay." The little girl grinned and trotted off after the Animagus.

"I'll go get Severus," Shadow offered. He left Draco and Salazar staring at each other in a type of battle of wills. Shaking his head, he slipped into the hallway and hurried toward the study dedicated to Potions. Severus had turned it into a miniature lab. There was always something boiling and simmering in there.

Severus didn't look up when he walked in. His short brown hair hung limp and greasy against his forehead. Like Draco, his roots were beginning to show. It surprised Shadow's just how much he
missed talking to the man, missed his old and familiar appearance, just missed his father period.

"Severus. Salazar is finished. He wants to talk to us."

Dark obsidian eyes flashed up and acknowledged him. "I'll be right there."

Shadow nodded and slipped back out of the room. He found Draco and Salazar in the same spots he'd left them in. Amused, he sat next to Draco and tried to pretend that he wasn't nervous about what Salazar had discovered. Draco glanced over and Shadow felt like he could see right through him. He blushed and turned his face away, sipping at his water.

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long and the tension only had a few minutes to build before Severus stepped into the room with the smell of potions coming off his robes. All three gave their complete attention to the phantom.

Salazar preened; a smirk tipped the corner of his mouth up. "I have examined Seraphim thoroughly. The Dark Lord's personality is no longer influencing the alter."

"But the marks..." Shadow interrupted, a frown marring his brow.

"The feather marks are not similar to the Dark Mark. Rowena agrees. The feathers allow Draco and Marissa to connect to Seraphim whereas the Dark Mark allows the Dark Lord power over the bearer. They are almost opposite in nature. It is within the werewolf's nature to mark their territory. Seraphim thought of it on his own. The Black magic gave him the knowledge to create the magical bonds.

"Think of it this way, does every Death Eater have access to the Dark Lord’s magic when they get upset? Of course not! The Dark Lord would never allow himself to be drained by his followers, but the feather marks allowed Draco to draw upon Seraphim’s power. It's hard to say if Marissa will be able to do the same. The feather makes it difficult to determine if the child has magic in her naturally or if the scans are just sensing the magic in the mark. You'll have to wait until she's older to know if she's a Muggle or not."

"I don't think it matters," Shadow murmured.

Draco shot him a look. "Of course it matters. How do you think she'll feel growing up next to all this magic and not have any of her own?"

"Boys," Severus cut in when Shadow began to glare dangerously. "We are discussing something else."

Salazar took the cue and continued. "As for Seraphim's mentality, the alter is surprisingly stable. Seraphim is far from sane, but because his mindset is that of terror or rage, the two disparate emotions in a way neutralize each other into a semblance of calm. In an isolated and stable environment, Seraphim's mind maintains a fragile balance between the two, allowing some self-control. When in his Animagus form, the werewolf and dove instincts and drives further soften the trauma and give Seraphim's mind a way to think in a practical and immediate sense, distancing him from the trauma in the past."

"He's not always afraid or angry," Draco argued fiercely. "There were times when he laughed or smiled. He can feel happiness."

"I'm not saying he can't," Salazar snapped back. "I'm merely saying that Seraphim constantly vacillates between fear and anger. He does not think in the same way a normal, healthy person would. The more Seraphim is stimulated - even positively stimulated - the quicker his moods will swing and the more excited, and possibly violent, he will become."
Draco refused to believe that Seraphim could not be rehabilitated, but Salazar insisted that it was impossible. The alter's thought patterns were the result of years of abuse and trauma. He could be managed, Draco had proven that, but not healed. Seraphim would never be able to function normally within society.

Shadow accepted the news calmly. He'd suspected something like this would be the case. Severus was right. There was no way that the abuse Boy had suffered and the rage and hate Demon had been encouraged to cultivate to be cured. He was just glad that Voldemort really was out of his mind.

Draco stared at his friend. He was worried by the calm manner Shadow had adopted lately. No matter what came up, he took everything in almost apathetically. Was Shadow despairing? Was he giving up? His eyes cut to Severus, the one person who might be able to know what his son was thinking and help him through it.

Severus always had a way to see right through his son, but the Potions Master was getting further details out of Salazar, not even looking in their direction. His face was pale and there were fatigue lines around his eyes and mouth. Draco had no idea what the man had been working on, but he wished it didn't consume so much of his time.

"I'm going to go work on the snitch," Shadow murmured, bringing Draco's attention back toward him.

"You okay?" Draco asked just as softly.

"Yeah. This wasn't the worst news we could've gotten. At least Seph didn't give you and Marissa Dark Marks."

Draco smiled back at his friend, but it was half-hearted on both their parts. Shadow slipped from the room quietly and again Draco turned his attention to Severus. The man nodded to something Salazar said and turned to return to the Potions study. Draco frowned severely. Severus hadn't even looked to see if Shadow was still here.

"Severus."

The man turned back impatiently, his eyes dull.

"You might want to take some time out of your busy schedule to actually check on your son. He's been very withdrawn recently," Draco said with challenge in his eyes.

Severus sneered, rage flashing over his features.

Draco braced himself for whatever onslaught his mentor was about to launch, but Severus merely spun and stormed out of the dining room. Releasing his pent up breath, Draco rose and went to continue the research on Tom Riddle’s early life. They were hoping to find clues to the Horcruxes in the volumes of Dumbledore's copious and vague notes. McGonagall had supplied them at Severus's request, though she wasn't told why.

xXx

Hermione slipped into the Room of Requirement around 9:45 that night. She wasn't surprised to see Shadow and Draco already there, circling each other. Both of the teenage boys were sweating and completely focused on their opponent. Hermione stayed back a ways and observed them.

Shadow was still too thin. Draco was taller by two inches, standing at about five foot eight. He was broader in the shoulders and waist, but he was also on the lanky side. Draco was obviously larger
and heavier, but Shadow was more flexible. When Draco began shooting off curse after curse, the curly-haired teen dodged and twisted away from the ones he didn't simply shield against. Then he returned the volley. Draco dove to the ground and rolled before springing to his feet, closer to Shadow than before.

Spell light flashed between them. They were both graceful and magically skilled. Shadow seemed able to shoot off and maintain more spells, but Draco was more precise. They were pretty evenly matched, actually. At the moment, Draco had his feet incased in ice and could only speak gibberish, forcing him to cast spells silently or not at all. Shadow had a cut on his cheek that was freely bleeding from a spell he hadn't completely dodged, and his left arm hung limp.

Suddenly the tension shifted to something else. Hermione’s eyes went round as she watched. The ice incasing Draco shattered and he rolled forward. Shadow tried to back up, but he was already against the wall. His two-colored eyes went wide, his cheeks flushed. Hermione saw the brunet's decision not to dodge to the side. Instead, he let Draco come to his feet and pin him to the wall. Their serious expressions melted at the same time and turned into wild grins. She gaped silently when Draco crashed his mouth down on the shorter teen's.

Shadow's right hand rose and wrapped around Draco's waist, pulling him closer, while Draco reached up to cradle Shadow's face in his hands almost tenderly as his mouth tried to swallow Shadow whole. Hermione felt heat rise in her cheeks. The two boys were just so raw and passionate.

Shadow flexed his hips forward, arching his body upward as he groaned. Draco plundered his mouth, his fingers tightening in the soft black curls as he pushed forward, pressing Shadow even harder against the wall. This time she gasped.

Shadow's eyes snapped open and to the side, seeing her. He instantly paled and shoved Draco hard in the chest. Panting, Draco took a few steps back. His grey eyes flashed over to her furiously. She swallowed and felt her heart rate quicken in fear.

"I thought I'd, ah, come early to, um, set up a few things," she stuttered nervously in explanation.

"It was my understanding that the room did such things for you," Draco drawled, eyes still burning angrily at her.

"Well, that's true…” She trailed off, not sure what she should say. She glanced at Shadow for help and was surprised to see him looking distinctly upset. He turned his back to her when he saw her looking and walked away toward a table where he'd placed his robe.

"What is it you wanted to set up, Granger?" Draco snapped, drawing her attention back toward him.

"I figured you'd want to look over the notes of what we've covered so far. I thought I'd come early and show you around," she answered firmly, regaining her composure. Her eyes cut back to Shadow and saw that he'd pulled on his robe and was now shifting his feet nervously in a manner that reminded her distinctly of her Harry. She gestured him closer. “Come tell me what you think. I keep thinking we're missing something, but I can't come up with it.”

Draco stood stiffly, his expression cold. He'd been wanting to get Shadow to let down his guard enough for a good snog for a week. He wasn't happy at all that Hermione Granger had wrecked the moment. He knew it would be twice as hard now to get Shadow willing to mess around again. His anger rose as he thought of why Shadow felt uncomfortable with intimacy and he wished he'd been allowed to kill Lockhart himself.
So lost in thought, Draco hardly paid attention to what Shadow and Hermione were talking about as they leaned over a table and went through the notes compiled on all the things the DA was working on and had covered previously. His attention was instead focused on the messy curls, the still faintly red cheeks, the gorgeous swollen lips. It was enough to drive him crazy.

"Transfiguration," Shadow suddenly announced.

"What?" Hermione frowned.

"You've got defensive charms and potions. Shields, curses, hexes, Arithmancy circles, wards, and almost every other subject. No Transfiguration." Shadow's embarrassment and momentary panic finally left him completely as he looked up at his Gryffindor friend.

"What kind of Transfigurations would be useful?" Hermione asked with a frown.

"Lots of things," Shadow grinned. "Turning the floor to ice while using Sticking Charms on your own shoes. The Animagus transformation. Transfiguring metal items into weapons, such as knives. Turning robes into ropes."

"That's brilliant! Why didn't I think of that?" Hermione cried, excited now. "Let's work on some of that tonight."

"Sure." He shrugged with a smile. "It doesn't really help in a duel. It takes too much time and can be canceled easily if your opponent knows what you're doing, but if you plan ahead or sneak up on someone Transfiguration can come in really handy."

Hermione was nodding now. She grabbed a blank parchment and was furiously writing down all the ideas that popped into her head on how Transfiguration could be used in a battle situation. She bit on the end of the quill, thoughts racing.

"The Animagus transformation will be very handy and everyone will love it, but it takes so long to learn. And if you rush it, you ruin your only chance. You only get one try at the final spell, but I suppose we can go over it and people can start learning on their own if they want." Her eyes focused on her friend who was smiling at her in bemusement. "I guess you won't feel comfortable giving a demonstration. I can, but it's not a very impressive form like yours."

"I'd like to keep my Animagus form secret for now," Shadow agreed.

"What about you, Draco?" Hermione turned to face the sulking Slytherin.

Draco hadn't expected to be drawn so quickly into the conversation and hesitated for a moment. He winced when Shadow's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he said, "I haven't mastered the form yet."

"Oh. Okay." She went back to working on her notes.

Shadow moved forward to question him, but Draco was saved as people began trickling into the room.

There were shocked gasps and excited murmurs as the students caught sight of both he and Shadow. Soon they were answering questions and reassuring them that they were all right, that they were still going to fight. Then everyone was clamoring to know what they thought of the attacks being reported in the papers.

"Did you read Monday's Daily Prophet?" Dean Thomas asked solemnly. "Giants attacked Summerset. Muggles think it was something called a hurricane."
"Hagrid's missing," Ginny added. "People think either McGonagall sent him off to try and stop the giants from attacking again, or that he was called by the giants and is helping them. Of course, those who know Hagrid know he'd never really do that. I think he's trying to stop them."

"I never knew Hagrid very well," Shadow answered, keeping to his Slytherin persona. "But I doubt the Headmistress would let him leave Hogwarts if he meant harm. She would have contained him somehow."

"I agree," Hannah Abbot cried. "Hagrid wouldn't hurt anyone."

"I'm glad Grubby-Planks still's teaching us," Gryffindor Jessica Simpson added. "And he's going to be the Grounds Keeper, too, so Umbridge doesn't have to call in anyone else."

"What's up with the Slytherins, mate?" Hufflepuff Seeker Darlene Summerby spoke up. "They've been mighty quiet lately."

Draco fielded this one. "Carrow isn't lily-pure or sweet. She's been giving them a hard time. In fact, she's fifty shades eviler than Snape ever was to Gryffindors and that's got to say something."

There was dark muttering at this. Despite Slytherin being the "bad" House at Hogwarts, the others didn't like to see anyone attack one of their own, much like siblings who tortured each other actually.

"I think she gets her school supplies from Umbridge," Shadow added meaningfully.

The curse on the Blood Quill made it impossible to talk about, but everyone would know what he was referring to. Dark and determined glances were his only response. Everyone in the DA would do what they could to help the Slytherins.

Shadow was encouraged by this. He was very surprised to see how many people were in the club. He'd glanced at the Secrecy Scroll where everyone signed their name before joining and counted twenty-seven Gryffindors, twenty-two Ravenclaws, and nineteen Hufflepuffs. A good quarter of those were in the room tonight.

"All right, everyone," Hermione called, clapping her hands. "Let's get busy. We can gossip later."

There were nods to this and the crowd broke up into organized groups. Draco and Shadow split up to join them. They warmed-up with shields and attack spells, moved onto physical drills and charms, and then Hermione told them about using Transfiguration. She read off the many applications and had each group practice doing five things from her list. At the end of the lesson, Shadow was certain he was going to collapse from exhaustion.

"Okay, everyone. It's almost twelve-thirty. Time to go to bed, but before we go, I want to tell you I've mastered the Animagus transformation." She quickly turned into a mouse and back again. "You have only one chance at it, and it's a very advanced bit of magic, but anyone who wants to give it a try, stay after, and I'll go over the process with you."

Shadow, having already mastered the transformation, waved at Hermione and she waved back. He found Draco waiting for him by the door and fell into step with him heading back down to the Chamber. They had already slipped into Rogan's room to deliver the snake pendant they'd charmed to hiss "open" in Parseltongue before going to the DA.

"So. What was that about earlier?" Shadow drawled after they slid down the slide.

Draco turned and smiled. "You're beautiful, what can I say?"
Shadow immediately turned bright red and scowled furiously. "Not that! The bit about being an Animagus. Did you master the transformation with Sirius? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't," Draco said carelessly and turned to walk further into the Chamber.

Shadow grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Don't give me that. I saw your face. You've mastered it." His face softened from its angry cast and he smiled slyly. "You're not really a toad, are you?"

"No, I'm not a toad," Draco growled furiously and tried to yank away.

"What then? You're obviously mortified by your form." Shadow gave him puppy-eyes. "Come on, Serpentine. I won't laugh. Tell me."

Draco crossed his arms as Shadow slipped in front of him and prevented his retreat. The curly-haired teen was grinning and his eyes sparkled with mirth. He was gorgeous when he was so flushed and excited. With a deep sigh, he let his arms fall as he eyed his best friend.

"Not one mocking comment. Not one," he demanded seriously.

"I swear," Shadow vowed, miming locking his mouth shut and throwing away the key.

"I don't want Severus to see," Draco muttered and grabbed Shadow’s wrist to drag him across the Chamber and into the hallway. They slipped into the first study they came to. Draco warded the door as best he could and turned to find Shadow watching with a smile curling his lips and his arms crossed expectantly.

"Not a word," he reminded.

Shadow waved for him to hurry up, obediently not saying a word.

Closing his eyes, Draco relaxed his mind and body. He felt the change come. At first, he tensed but then let it happen. He was embarrassed, yes, but he wasn't ashamed exactly. It was just he thought he'd be a more dangerous animal.

Shadow didn't know what to expect. He stared as Draco shimmered and shrank until a large white bird stood before him with an extremely long tail flowing behind him. At first, he didn't know what he was looking at. The bird was a little over four feet tall (130 cm); its head reaching Shadow's waist. It had a cute, small, and delicate head with little black eyes. Its sharp, straight beak was a white-pink color, and a rounded feather rose straight up from his head. Two large wings were tucked along its sides and had perfect long feathers like a swan.

Then the tail rose.

It rose an additional five feet (1.5 m) into the air to reach a total height of nine feet and fanned out in a magnificent display. Shadow's breath whooshed out on a little laugh. Draco was a bloody peacock! As funny as it was that the vain Slytherin was a pure white peacock of all things, the undeniable beauty before him softened his features with awe. The hundred long feathers with eye shapes at the end, the soft edges, the sheer height and width of them, the bird was magnificent. Draco's feathers reached taller than Shadow's by several feet and almost touched the walls of the room on either side.

The peacock stepped forward on two delicate white-pink legs and the tail waved and dipped gracefully, putting on a display of it's plumage. Then the bird began to shimmer and stretch until human Draco stood facing Shadow. There was a slight blush on his high cheekbones and Shadow smiled at seeing it.
"I can't believe Sirius hasn't told us what you change into," he said, trying to keep a straight face. Draco's blush deepened. "I may have Obliviated him in a moment of rage."

Shadow couldn't take it. He burst out laughing.

Draco scowled and stormed from the study, slamming the door behind him.

xXx

The next day Draco avoided Shadow completely. Left alone, Shadow decided to work on the snitch. Hermione's coin showed the DA meeting was scheduled right after dinner at seven. He had all day to work on the infuriating puzzle, but by lunch he grew so frustrated that he decided to look up something else: the symbology behind Draco's form.

**The Peacock**

This blue-green bird represents the blending of all the colors of the spectrum and, hence, represents the idea of wholeness. A person with this animal as their Animagus form will therefore be self-aware to a degree that many never obtain. This lends them confidence, as well as renders them hyper-aware of being manipulated.

St. Augustine of Hippo put the belief of the Peacock's incorruptibility to the test. Roast Peacock was served at dinner in Carthage and he ordered the meat from the breast to be put aside. After thirty days, he found that there was no bad smell. After a year, the Peacock's flesh had become only a little desiccated, thus proving the theory. Those with the Peacock animals have a purity of focus. They tend to be very clear on their goals and how to get there. It is very hard to corrupt them away from their chosen paths.

...

Shadow snorted. He could see Draco's smug smile now at being described as incorruptible. And it was true in many ways. Lucius had tried very hard to mold his son in his own image, but Draco would never be anyone but himself.

...

The Peacock is also known to hunt snakes. This symbolizes victory over poisonous tendencies. Those with this Animagus are often immune to the negative emotions of others, maintaining clear vision, and this leads them to often find a way to turn almost any situation to their advantage.

...

The fact that Draco would turn any situation to his advantage was the definition of being Slytherin. Shadow laughed out loud when that was represented by eating snakes.

...

This clear vision is also represented in the many eyes on the Peacock's tail. Those with this Animagus are not only self-aware, but they are also observant and intuitive when it comes to others. These types of people are gifted with the ability of insight and intuition, often making others uncomfortable. Early European superstition saw the Peacock as bad luck due to the disturbing "all-seeing eyes" on its tail. Later, the eye-like patterns came to represent the stars, the universe, the sun, the moon, and the vault of heaven. Diviners began to use the tail to accurately foretell the future.
This connects to the symbolism behind the Peacock's voice, which is a harsh unpleasant sound. The Peacock has a fearful voice because others don't want to hear what the Peacock has to say. Often those with the Peacock Animagus have reported feeling like their advice isn't listened to and that's a driving frustration in their lives. There is some speculation that if the Peacock were to learn to advise people sweetly instead of with blunt or harsh observation, they would be listened to more readily.

Shadow rolled his eyes. That's all he needed, Draco thinking his advice was always gold, but he could completely agree to the sweetening the peacock approach. Sometimes he could just punch Draco in the face.

And, of course, the Peacock symbolizes vanity, pride, and materialism. The fact that the Peacock struts around, fully aware of his own beauty, is a good signifier of these things being found in those who have this Animagus. They tend to surround themselves with beautiful things and take pride in their own appearance. It makes them feel happy and secure.

According to feng-shui, "Peacocks are a symbol of beauty reminding us to take pleasure in the finer things in life. The main symbolism of the Peacock is pride and vanity when its tail is displayed. A Peacock with its tail down (rather than displayed) can be a sign of humility, of restraining one's pride as the Peacock resists displaying its tail."

That was certain. He remembered Draco when they were shopping and the time it took for him to get ready for anything. Vain was definitely a quality Draco possessed, as well as pride. Shadow thought Draco needed to work on the humility and "resist displaying his tail". The imagery that thought evoked made him blush. He quickly read on.

The feathers are also solar symbols. Like many solar symbols, the Peacock is an emblem of resurrection, immortality, and the incorruptible soul. These symbolic associations were strengthened by the belief that Peacock flesh was not subject to spoilage and that when Peacocks molted their old feathers were replaced by ever more beautiful ones. The length of the tail indicates the length of the life to come.

"Thank Merlin Draco's tail was so huge," Shadow exclaimed softly.

Its feathers may be burnt to ward off disease and even to cure snakebite. The Peacock is credited with an ability to neutralize and use black aconite (aconitum ferox) as a nutriment. This highly toxic plant, also known as "'wolf-bane", is an important ingredient in traditional medicine. Mixed with other ingredients, it was used in treatments for mental illness, among other complaints.

In Asia, the feathers of the Peacock are considered protective. Skanda, one of the two sons of Indian god, Shiva, has a Peacock for his mount. Lord of the Elements of Form, he is also a war god. In some Islamic traditions, it has been portrayed as the greeter at the gates of paradise and, thus, is considered to be a bird of protection and safe guarding. This bird is also valued as a protection for the psychic self.
**But what is perhaps the most special attribute of the Peacock, and those who have this as their spirit-animal, is the fact that they mate for life.**

...

Shadow's heart skipped a beat after reading this line. Suddenly, he felt certain he'd gotten in over his head, but his eyes were drawn almost helplessly forward.

...

*Many consider this bird as the perfect mate. Greeks and Romans considered the Peacock sacred to Hera and kept them in her temple. Hera was quite the zealous protectress of marriage and the home. The Peacock is pure of heart, loyal, and faithful to their partners. The male Peacock goes to great lengths to attract his heart's desire.*

*Myth has the Peacock representing fidelity, as it dies of grief or remains single if it loses its mate. This has been supported by the records of those with this form as their Animagus. They all had one true love and never formed another romantic attachment. In fact, you can tell when this attachment has been formed. Their Peacock forms turned all white when they found their life partner, no longer needing the spectacular colors to attract their love.*

...

"Oh, god," Shadow breathed, faced with the sheer depth of Draco's feelings for him.

...

*They are dedicated, loyal, and have never been recorded as having cheated on their mate. They are indeed the perfect husbands, as all those with this Animagus have been male. To this day in Europe people display the image of the Peacock in the home to symbolize fidelity in the relationship and to encourage a lasting and loving partnership.*

*In conclusion, the Peacock brings harmony and joy to the mind. This bird is majestic, proud, expressive, and intuitive. Just as the male bird walks and dances to the female in courting, those with this Animagus reminds others of the celebration in life.*

...

Shadow shut the book and closed his eyes. To many things hit too close to home. The fact that Draco loved him so deeply that his heart had bonded to Shadow for life, the fact that those with the Peacock Animagus worked well with those who had mental illnesses due to their insight and their drive to protect. It was all very overwhelming.

Laying his head down on the open book before him, he stared almost blindly at the little snitch that was driving them all mad. He closed his eyes and saw again the beautiful white peacock who spread his feathers for him in a glorious display last night. His chest felt tight because part of him felt guilty as hell. Draco deserved so much better than Shadow's fucked up shit. On the other hand, Shadow felt deeply grateful. He loved Draco in return for his unwavering support. He'd do anything for the Slytherin.

He opened his eyes and puffed out an annoyed breath. It caught the snitch and the golden ball rocked a bit. Narrowing his eyes, he blew again. Tiny golden letters appeared on the outside. Shadow's heart rocketed in his chest as excitement momentarily distracted him from Draco's Animagus form. He gently lifted the snitch and blew on it again.
Shadow’s brow furrowed thoughtfully when suddenly he remembered what Firenze had told him.

"The Broken One left you something to help unravel the puzzle of the Soulless Lord. All things have a beginning, and all things must return to their beginning in order to reach their end."

Glancing down at the passage about the peacock, thinking of Draco and beginnings, he looked again at the snitch in his hand and blew on it gently. *I Open at the Close.* A large smile broke out across his face and he leapt to his feet, knocking his chair back. It fell with a muffled thump as he bolted from the room.

"Draco! DRACO!" he yelled as he ran down the circular hall with many doors.

Draco heard his friend’s shout and about jumped out of his skin. Eyes wide, terrified they were under attack or something, he leapt for the door, wand in hand. He entered the hallway and sprinted toward Shadow’s frantic calls. "What happened? What's wrong?" he demanded as he caught sight of the tousled-haired teen.

Shadow was standing there, lifting that stupid snitch in his hand, a wide grin almost splitting his face in two. "I figured it out!"

"What!" Draco felt the adrenaline leave his system and he grinned back. "How?" He followed Shadow eagerly toward the Potions study, listening eagerly to the description of accidentally breathing on it and then remembering what Firenze said. Before Shadow could finish, Draco figured it out himself. "You have to put it in your mouth! It's the first snitch you caught!"

Shadow beamed at him. "Exactly!" He flung open the study door and called loudly inside. "We figured out the snitch. I'm going to open it." Without waiting for a response, Shadow continued on toward the dinning room where they would have more room. "Omi!"

The little elf appeared with wide blue eyes, reacting to the energy coming off the two teens.

"Fetch Sirius and Marissa. Have them come here," Shadow ordered.

The elf nodded frantically before disappearing.

"I can't believe we didn't think of this before," Shadow continued, too excited to sit and be calm.

"I can. What cryptic rot," Draco muttered, upset that the answer was so easy. But then again, it usually was.

Severus came striding into the room. Sirius and Marissa stumbled in on his heels. The little girl clapped when Shadow again raised the snitch triumphantly and exclaimed he knew how to open it. Draco smiled as Shadow happily explained to an eager audience how he figured it out. Draco was just glad this mess was almost done with. They were all getting a bit house-happy. Well, except for Sirius and Marissa who were having a blast pranking all of them. He growled as he remembered the bubble gum pink hair they'd give him last week. One thing was certain, they wouldn't prank him like that again.

"Very well," Severus drawled and flicked his long fingers impatiently. "Let's see."

"Yes! Show us!" Marissa cried, clapping again. "Is there a prize inside?"

Shadow flashed her grin. "I sure hope so. We could really use a prize at this point."
Draco met his eyes as Shadow opened his mouth and put the little snitch inside. Everyone froze and watched unblinking as that mouth closed. No one was prepared when instead of pulling out an open snitch, Shadow's eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed bonelessly. Draco dove forward just fast enough to cushion his head before it impacted the stone floor.

"Shadow!" he cried, terrified.

Severus moved forward, already casting diagnostic charms, while Sirius swept a screaming Marissa into his arms and held her tight to keep her out of the way. Draco desperately tried to pry his love's mouth open, but his jaw was locked. Desperately, he looked up at his mentor.

Severus's eyes flickered from side to side as they quickly read the results of the diagnostic. "There is no foreign substance being introduced into his system, so he's not being poisoned. His breathing is unobstructed, so he's not choking on the thing. It appears he is merely sleeping. Dreaming, to be precise."

"Dreaming…" Draco whispered with a frown.

"Shadow!" Marissa was crying hysterically.

"It could be imparting another clue as to the Dark Lord's Horcruxes," Severus speculated, his features going still as he found his calm center.

"Or Dumbledore may be trying to brainwash him or it could be an attack on his mind!" Draco cried. "We have to stop this!"

"Calm down, Draco. There is no evidence of distress. I believe Shadow's mind is controlled and organized enough to at least struggle against an unwanted intrusion."

"Is Shadow okay?" Marissa demanded again.

"He's fine, poppet," Sirius murmured to her, holding her tight. Her arms squeezed his neck tightly. "He's sleeping and is about to wake up real soon."

"Severus, do something!" Draco demanded.

"Ugh…"

Everyone fell silent, except for Marissa who hiccupped and sniffled, as all eyes turned toward the fallen teenager. Shadow groaned again and his eyes fluttered open. Pale and drained, he looked from one face to another as they hovered over him. Draco gently carded through his hair with a trembling hand, making Shadow smile.

Spitting out the snitch, he said hoarsely, "I'm okay. It was just intense."

"What happened?" Severus asked softly. He reached for his son's hands and helped pull him to his feet.

Shadow wavered and had to lean heavily into his father's side in order to keep his feet. Severus quickly pulled out a chair from the table. Shadow sat carefully, never letting go of his father's arms. Draco got to his own feet and sat in the chair next to his friend, worry creasing his features.

"I saw memories that Dumbledore harvested from some old witch from Hufflepuff's line." Shadow accepted Marissa as Sirius passed her over. The little girl sat on his lap and clung to his chest, still crying softly. He stroked her hair gently as he continued. "Tom just graduated from Hogwarts and
was working for that store that Merope sold Slytherin's locket to. Anyway, he made a delivery to this woman. She was a descendent of Hufflepuff. He managed to convince her to let him see Hufflepuff's Cup and she talked about Ravenclaw's Diadem. Those are the last two Horcruxes. He attacked her and stole the Cup. That's all I saw."

"Did you discover where they may be hidden?" Severus asked intently. His fingers rubbed a soothing circle on the back of Shadow's neck.

"No." Shadow looked up, his eyes tired. "But at least we've got something."

Severus nodded. "It's enough. We have a direction for our search now."

Shadow nodded.

"Here." Draco reached for a goblet of water and handed it to his friend, who drank thirstily. "Come on. Let's take a nap. We still have a couple hours before dinner."

Again Shadow nodded. Sirius gently took Marissa from him. The little girl waved at Shadow and said softly, "I'm glad you're okay, Shadow."

"Me, too." Shadow smiled at her and let Draco help him get back to his feet. He was so exhausted because his mind had fought the snitch's intrusion and had lost. They were almost out of the room when Severus's voice pulled them to a halt.

"Tomorrow morning I'd like to talk to you in the Transfiguration study."

Shadow smiled over his shoulder. "Sure. See you there at nine? After breakfast?"

Severus inclined his head and let the two teens continue to bed.

Taking it slow, Draco walked with his arm around Shadow's waist, his friend leaning against his side. He tried not to find the position pleasant, after all Shadow was hurt, but he couldn't help the heat beginning to pool in his belly and groin at Shadow needing him. Finally, they reached Shadow's room and Draco's libido kicked into overdrive as Shadow let him take off his robe, revealing a button-down shirt and slacks.

Shadow lay down and watched through half-lidded eyes as Draco removed his shoes and socks. "You didn't look up the peacock symbology, did you?" he asked sleepily.

Draco's grey eyes met his and they were dark with desire. "No." He shrugged. "I know what the peacock means. Beauty, vanity, and pride. Besides, I was in a hurry to memorize the physical anatomy."

"When did you finish it?"

"Two weeks before Christmas break. Sirius came in the afternoons during my free period to help me while you were busy with Rogan and the others."

"Hmmm," Shadow hummed in response, his eyes slipping closed. Draco moved toward the door, but Shadow stopped him. "Sleep with me?"

Draco considered. He definitely had a problem in his pants to take care of, but on the other hand Shadow very rarely let him get so close for so long. Decided, he moved forward and crawled onto the bed. He grinned happily when he saw Shadow's small smile when the bed dipped.
Gently, lovingly, he brushed Shadow's curls away from his face and whispered softly, "Sweet dreams."

Shadow was asleep before he could answer.

xxx

Shadow slipped into the one of the many studies in the Chamber and smiled when he saw Severus waiting for him. The Potions Master hadn't gone to breakfast, so he'd been afraid his father may have forgotten the meeting he'd requested yesterday. Shadow moved toward the couch, which sat across from the sofa chair Severus sat in comfortably. He was wearing a black wizarding robe and his legs were crossed, his long-fingered hands linked over his knee.

"I apologize for my unavailability recently. Thankfully, I have finished the project I've been working on and can return my attention to more pressing matters. Tell me what you've been doing. Omi informed me you've been entering Hogwarts at night."

"Draco and I have been going to DA meetings. We could use the practice and I wanted to gage the mood of the students," Shadow explained, sitting across from him on the couch. He wasn't afraid of his father's opinion. Severus had been unavailable, as he'd said. He had no right to question the decisions made in his absence. "It's been really good actually. Draco and I've been getting a work out. And it's nice to see everyone again."

Severus nodded. "That is good."

"We made three pendants that hiss in Parseltongue. I gave one to Rogan for emergencies if they ever really need to escape Carrow, I gave another to Neville for similar reasons, and the last to Sirius so we could shut the side door. Now I'm not the only one who can open the Chamber."

"That seems necessary, but I worry the charms could fall into the wrong hands." Severus smiled wryly. "I assume you've considered this."

Shadow nodded. "The charms I gave Neville and Rogan will only work for adolescent magic. Sirius's will work for anyone, but I'm sure he won't let anything happen to it."

"Clever. I am also proud that you discovered the key to the snitch. You've been doing very well here."

"Thanks." Shadow blushed, surprised by how much Severus's approval affected him. He brushed curls from his eyes in a nervous gesture and eyed his father. "That's not why you wanted this meeting though."

"Draco mentioned you've been withdrawn and we have yet to talk about Salazar's discoveries concerning Seraphim." Severus leaned forward. "I've been reflecting on the relationship you have with your alter and have decided that a less antagonistic attitude toward Seraphim might be beneficial."

Shadow scowled and crossed his arms. "Draco put you up to this, didn't he?"

Severus lifted an eyebrow. "I assure you I have not spoken to Draco any more than I've spoken to you."

"He thinks I should find a way to use Seraphim. He doesn't understand that there is no using him." Shadow threw up his hands in frustration. "I'm not conscious, or aware, or in control in any way. And he's too dangerous to let Out. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not angry at him any longer, but I'm
not just going to set him free. This is my life and I want to be in control of it as much as I can."

"That is understandable," Severus agreed. "So you are still set against merging?"

Shadow stared at his father in disbelief. "Of course."

Severus nodded to himself thoughtfully.

"What? You're actually thinking it might be a good idea?" Shadow leapt to his feet, his voice rising as he stared in shock at his father. "Are you completely insane? Seraphim is nuts. Merging with him would be like a death sentence. You heard Salazar. He can't be fixed! Merging would just strip me of the last bit of sanity I have."

"Perhaps, but now is not the time to consider such things." Severus reached forward and tugged Shadow's hand until the teenager was sitting again. "We are in too much danger during the war to contemplate a move that may render you vulnerable. How are you and Draco? I am aware that your relationship seems to have deepened. Not to mention the fact I found you curled up in his lap last week when we first arrived at Hogwarts."

Shadow blushed a deep crimson. "You did? Oh. Well… uh…"

Severus smiled. "I do not need details. I am merely inquiring as to how you feel about this development."

"Severus…" Shadow groaned, covering his face with his hands.

He was mortified, but at the same time he actually felt like it might be nice to be able to talk to someone about his feelings regarding Draco. He opened his fingers to peer through them. Severus was waiting patiently, his face calm, his breathing even. Gathering his courage, Shadow dropped his hands into his lap and stared at his twisting fingers.

"It's actually pretty serious. I mean, he said he loved me out loud, and recently I was shown without a doubt how much Draco cares for me."

"Do you feel the same?" Severus asked evenly, seemingly unperturbed by the topic.

"I do," Shadow said on a sigh. "I hate admitting it because… Well, it frightens me. But while I was watching him die slowly, I knew without a doubt how much of my life would be wrecked if Draco were to leave me. I need him. I depend on him. I want him to be happy. I like that I can fight with him, that he doesn't treat me differently because of my mental condition. And he's beautiful; I admire his strength. He makes me laugh, and he takes care of me."

Severus was amazed that Shadow was saying so much, but listened intently to his son. He could feel a huge but coming.

"I like how he helps Seraphim and is able to tame him somewhat, but I hate that he likes Seph so much. I want Draco to understand, but I also want him to like me better, to want me to stay like this, whole and sane. It really, really pisses me off whenever Draco talks about Seph like he's a person that he cares about. It's insane, but it makes me feel jealous, and I don't know what to do about it. That's another reason why I don't want Seph Out at all. I don't want Draco spending more time with him. Obviously Seraphim likes Draco, too. It makes me uncomfortable because Seraphim isn't me, as much as he is. If that makes sense? I don't want him doing things with Draco like marking him or seducing him."

Severus sat silently as he considered how to address his son's concerns. Shadow was staring intently
at the wall, his cheeks red and his hands clenched together so forcefully that his knuckles were white. "The situation you are both in is complicated, and I am certain that Draco is equally confused. I suggest that when you are more comfortable, you talk to him about it. He's the only one who can help you come to a mutually acceptable resolution."

"I did talk to him about it," Shadow admitted with a grimace. "That's when he actually admitted to loving me. He didn't seem confused at all. He just insisted that Seraphim and I are the same. That Seraphim is just me in a more raw and primal state. Because he loves me, there is no possible way for him not to love Seraphim, he said."

"I see." Severus steepled his fingers before his mouth. "And how did you respond?"

Shadow flushed red. "I was a bit overwhelmed by everything he was telling me. I mean, I'm really grateful that he can accept me and Seraphim, and he said he loved me. We, ah, made out, I guess, before really finishing the discussion. I, ah, haven't brought it up since then."

Severus's eyes widened. "Do you feel that comfortable? I am surprised, but happy that you seem to be finding peace with your fears."

Shadow flushed. This conversation was getting more difficult, but he didn't want Severus's praise when it was undeserved. "I'm not all that over my fears," he confessed softly. "I walked in on Hermione and Ron kissing." He took a deep breath, pushing past the remembered feelings watching them had evoked. "It made me feel sick. Like what they were doing was disgusting. In general, I still feel that way about…" He bit his lip, wringing his hands. "… you know, sex."

Severus lifted an eyebrow. "And yet you are kissing Draco."

"I know."

"The human mind is very complex. It isn't unusual for people to manage rationalizations to allow them to do things that in general they have a problem with. Especially if such actions are physically or emotionally satisfying. I assume that being with Draco provides you with both."

Shadow bit his lip, his stomach clenched with deep unhappiness. "It's different with Draco. He makes me feel…" Uncomfortable, he didn't finish the sentence and looked at his father helplessly.

"I understand," Severus said softly, eyes steady and deep. "Believe me, I do."

"Well, he makes me forget everything else for those few moments. And it just sort of happens, and I know Draco likes it, and I want to make him happy. I do love him. I admit that I like it, too. I just can't stand thinking about it when I'm cool-headed."

Shadow shook his head. Sweat slid down the side of his face and he felt about ready to bolt. Severus must have recognized the signs because he said nothing for a long minute while Shadow sat quietly, gulping in discreet mouthfuls of air and trying to ease the tension constricting his lungs. Severus called Omi and asked for tea for two. The elf reappeared a moment later with the asked for drinks. They prepared their cups with careful deliberation and sipped at the scalding liquid. "I'm certain Draco would not want you to push yourself. He would understand if you wanted to slow down the physical aspect of your relationship," Severus ventured cautiously.

"I know," Shadow admitted. "But in the moment, I'm okay."

Severus nodded and took a long sip at his tea, his expression thoughtful. "I believe you've come far enough to truly accept that what Lockhart did to you was in no way your fault. I also believe that
you are confident enough in yourself and in Draco that you are no longer afraid of being victimized."

Shadow thought about it. "I think you're right." He smiled, pleased by this realization.

"Therefore, the problem that remains is the matter of your sensitization to the subject. Besides Draco, you have no positive references to physical affection or intimacy. I don't believe your relatives were very affectionate in your presence."

"No," Shadow agreed with disgust. "Thank god. Did you really have to put that idea in my head?"

Severus ignored that. "The only way to overcome this instinctual revulsion is to experience harmless sexual experiences, like the one you witnessed between your Gryffindor acquaintances and between you and Draco."

"What are you suggesting?" Shadow asked, eyes wide. "I go around looking for snogging couples and stand there until I realize that it isn't really that horrible?"

Severus snorted. "Hardly. Don't force yourself to do anything. That would make the experience negative and reinforce the unhealthy associations you have formed due to your trauma. I merely suggest that you give yourself some time. Go slow, but don't avoid such situations if you feel you are capable of enduring it."

Shadow grimaced. "Thanks a lot. That's not really helpful. In fact, it's the opposite."

"There is no easy fix, Shadow," Severus said softly. He reached over and gently patted his son's clenched fist. "You know that."

The teen sighed and slouched into the couch. "Yeah. I know." He closed his eyes for a minute and just enjoyed being in Severus's soothing presence.

Slowly, the tension in the room eased. When Shadow felt he could face the conversation again, he cracked open his eyes to see Severus holding his tea cup while staring off thoughtfully. He smiled and sat up, drawing his father's eyes. "So what have you been working on? You've been like a ghost walking around here."

Severus carefully set his cup aside and regarded his son solemnly. "I've been trying to create a way to allow you to become Harry Potter when needed without glamours or other such things that can be detected."

Shadow immediately grew agitated. "I don't want to go back to being Harry Potter. I like being Shadow Snape."

"And you always will be Shadow Snape," Severus said evenly. "That will never change, no matter your outward appearance." He held up a hand when Shadow opened his mouth angrily. "I am aware that returning to Harry Potter's form permanently would be unpleasant for multiple reasons. That is why I said when needed."

"I don't understand," Shadow admitted with a frown.

"I've devised a potion that will return your genetic structure to what it was before the adoption by suppressing my genetics. It lasts a duration of twelve hours before wearing off and will be completely undetectable by any diagnostic spells."

"I don't know what to say." Shadow was amazed. "I've never heard of anything like that. It's genius."
Severus inclined his head. "I've been working on this since mid-July. Ms. Tonks helped months ago by supplying her blood so that I may study the Metamorphagus ability. The potion will only work for those in your situation, those who have been through the Familial Adoption Ritual, so I don't foresee the potion being in high demand."

"Still..." Shadow felt tears burn his eyes. "You did all this because you knew I'd need to be Harry Potter again?"

"Of course," Severus said softly. "You are my son. I will do what I can to protect you and provide you with a stable and safe future."

Shadow leapt to his feet and moved quickly across the space separating them. Severus stood with a faint tint of red on his cheeks and opened his arms. Shadow hugged him tight, feeling a glowing sense of pride, gratitude, and love almost overwhelm him. His cheeks hurt he was smiling so wide. Severus's arms held him gently, tightening once before falling away. Shadow stepped away reluctantly and smiled up at his father.

"So how does it work?"

"I've not had human test subjects, as you can guess, but I'm fairly certain that the potion will work. I've put rabbits and cats through the Adoption Ritual and then fed them my new potion. The animals returned to their original form for twelve hours before changing back into their adopted form. I'm unsure if they are now able to change at will, much like a Metamorphagus, or if you will need to continue ingesting the potion every time you wish to make the change. In any case, the potion can only be ingested once in twenty-four hours. Overdosing is fatal."

"Let's try it," Shadow exclaimed excitedly.

"I must warn you," Severus said somberly. "The change is painful due to the fact that it is forced and the lack of a natural Metamorphagus talent. I was unable to add an analgesic without rendering the potion useless."

"Okay," Shadow said slowly, eyes serious. "How much pain are we talking about? Enough to bring Seraphim to the surface?"

"I'm uncertain. Your control over when you switch has risen exponentially. Boy would invariably come Out before the last merge." Severus rubbed his potion-stained fingers over his eyes. "The readings I've recorded off the rabbits rated just above Cruciatus levels. It could differ in a human in either direction."

"There's only one way to find out," Shadow stated the obvious.

Severus nodded. "If I didn't feel the ability to take Harry Potter's form without endangering Shadow Snape's identity was essential, I would not ask you to do this."

"I know. I agree with you." Shadow reached over and squeezed his forearm. "I'll be okay. We'll have Remus there, and Draco in case Seraphim comes Out."

"Then we'll try it tonight, after you return from your DA meeting."

Shadow nodded. "I'll tell Draco." That said, he smiled at his father reassuringly and left in search of his friend.

xXx
Neville was feeling… *Tense* would be too light a word. He still wasn't able to go to DA meetings and this especially galled him now that his brother was going. Ginny was so busy with the lessons and such that she hardly had time for more than a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. When they did find time to be together, she often fell asleep leaning against him. He felt out of the loop and useless. On top of this, he still felt like something or someone malevolent was watching his every move.

The only thing that made him feel the slightest bit in control was his visits to Remus, but tonight his mentor regretfully explained that he was needed down in the Chamber for some dangerous experiment involving Shadow. Neville itched to go down with him, but the same thing that kept him from going to DA kept him from the Chamber. He didn't want whatever, or whoever, watching him to discover his brother's location.

He was too tense to go back to Gryffindor Tower, so he decided to wander the halls aimlessly to hopefully burn off his anxiety. His fingers twitched for his razor, but in a different way than before. Instead of intense emotional pain and despair, he felt frustrated and angry. It didn't help that winter was still gripping the earth, muting his magical senses and making him feel tired and edgy.

Suddenly, without warning whatsoever, his wrist was snared and he was yanked sideways into a dark unused classroom. Neville let out a startled cry and fumbled for his wand, eyes wide with terror. Light bloomed, blinding him further, and he flung himself backward, crashing into a broken desk, and tumbled to the floor. Soft laughter tinkled in his ears and he blinked furiously, blood rushing to his face as his heartbeat slowed to a more reasonable pace.

"Luna! What are you doing!" he snarled, slowly getting back to his feet. His hands were still shaking.

"You haven't come talk to me for a while," she pointed out. In the soft light of her Lumos, she looked almost like a ghost. The only thing colorful about her was her intense blue eyes. "I've missed you."

"I'm sorry. I guess I've just been distracted lately." He brushed his robes off nervously, a blush still staining his cheeks.

Luna nodded. "You should be more careful, Neville. If I had been the fairy, you would have been abducted."

Neville frowned and regarded her suspiciously. "Do you know who's been watching me? What do they want?"

"What all fairies want. To play with you. Too bad it hurts us so much to play." Luna tossed her long, fine hair over her shoulder and smiled. "But don't worry. Fairies are just as scared of us as we are of them."

Neville shook his head. Luna was his friend, but he wished she made more sense. It made him feel awkward, like he was missing something important. *Shadow probably would know what she meant,* he thought despairingly. A small hand curled around his own and he looked over to see Luna watching him with worried eyes.

"Are you hungry? We can go to the kitchens," she suggested.

"I'm not hungry, but thanks, Luna. You're a good friend." He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"Then let's duel. Practice is important in everything you do."

Neville felt his spirits lift and he hugged Luna tightly. "You always know just what I need, don't
you?"

Luna laughed and squeezed him back before spinning away and firing off a mild Cutting Curse. Neville barely managed to dodge it in time. He fell with his wand in hand and fired back a Stinging Hex. Blood rushing with purpose, magic beating through his veins, Neville felt the build up of tension slowly wane and he laughed happily, despite Luna shredding his robes with a well-aimed curse.

xXx

Shadow lay on his bed, his back propped up against pillows. Remus stood in the corner with Sirius, both men looked nervous and grim. Neither wanted Shadow to go through with this. They thought it was too dangerous without further testing first, but when asked how else they could test the potion, neither had been able to come up with anything.

Severus stood beside the bed, a large goblet in his hand filled with the potion. It was an ominous black color with murky purple depths. Draco stood tensely on the other side of the bed. He hadn't tried to talk Shadow out of it, but he wasn't thrilled either. Shadow knew if there was any way Draco could take the potion instead to test it before Shadow had to drink it, he would have. Knowing this made him feel strangely lightheaded. He was just glad that Marissa was asleep and would be spared whatever was about to happen.

"All right. Let's get this over with," he said firmly and reached for the potion. His whole mind was focused on one thought: No matter what happens, Seraphim must not come Out.

Severus released the goblet and stood solemnly by, his face carefully blank of all expression as his son lifted the potion to his lips.

Shadow was surprised when the potion tasted like nothing. Frowning, he considered that it didn't taste like nothing, rather it tasted like him. It was thin and fluid, sliding down his throat almost before he had a chance to swallow. He braced himself, expecting a burn. Nothing. He could feel everyone poised, ready for an explosion, but nothing was happening.

"I don't feel any diff…"

His voice cut out and he gasped silently, his back arching. It felt like his ribs were being prized out of his chest. The pain hit him so hard and so fast that he almost didn't recognize it as such. His whole body went startlingly numb before erupting in agony. He screamed desperately and thrashed, trying to fend off the invisible hands peeling his skin away in a slow, torturous manner. He wasn't aware of Severus holding him down, of Remus shouting, of Draco's cold hand in his own. He practically flew toward the black abyss, eager to escape his own body.

xXx

Draco covered his mouth with a shaking hand. The sounds that had come from his love's throat had flung him backward in time when Lucius had forced him to view his memories of Shadow being tortured in the graveyard. The way Shadow's body twisted out of shape and seemingly melted didn't help either.

Eyes wide, he stared blindly. All the progress he'd made, all the mental stability he'd gained, were washed away and he was again just a scared fifteen-year-old who'd just finished his fourth year of Hogwarts with an insane father lurking behind every corner and a powerless mother. He wasn't even sure if his best friend was still alive. The last image he would have of his one and only friend would be his pulverized and tortured body in a dark cemetery with looming headstones that might as well.
A sharp pain speared through his face and he blinked quickly, unknowingly spilling tears down his cheeks. He stared into Sirius's eyes and suddenly he was released from the past and hurdled forward into the present. His mother was murdered. Lucius was no longer his father. Draco was no longer a Malfoy. Shadow wasn't dead.

"You back with us?" Sirius demanded lowly.

"Yes." Draco wiped at his cheeks and straightened his shoulders out of their hunched position. He took deep, gasping breaths. Nothing like that had ever happened to him before. His heart belatedly kicked up into a rapid pace that almost had him blacking out again. Growling, he forced himself to calm and turned his attention to the rest of the room.

Remus was bending over the still form on the rumbled bed. Severus stood at Remus's back, peering over his shoulder. He was standing so rigidly that Draco thought he'd fall over if anyone pushed on his shoulder. Sirius was standing beside Draco, his presence somehow reminding him of the Pureblood standards of behavior and comforting him at the same time. Reluctantly, his eyes drifted to the last person in the room, dreading what he'd see.

Harry Potter lay on his back, his arms straight and loose at his sides. There was no mistaking the figure. The teen had messy dark brown - practically black - hair, golden skin, a round face, and thicker eyebrows. Shadow's robes looked too big on him, attesting to the fact that he'd lost some height. The only thing missing was the lightning bolt scar on the unmarred forehead. Draco knew it would still be over his heart where they had moved it.

"How is he?" he asked calmly, firmly in control of himself once again.

Remus straightened and stared at the young teen with amazement. "Fine besides exhausted from the change. I detect nothing wrong physically."

Severus let out a tense breath. "We should let him sleep."

"I agree." Remus nodded and moved toward the door.

"I'll sleep with him here," Draco spoke up. All three adults turned to look at him. He met their gazes evenly. "In case he wakes as Seraphim."

Severus nodded. "Very well."

Sirius grinned and elbowed his Heir before following the other two out of the room. As he was shutting the door, he winked and said, "Do be careful with him. He's been through an ordeal."


Sirius laughed and shut the door softly behind him.

xXx

Shadow cracked open his eyes and groaned. His head felt full of cotton. The room wavered strangely, and no matter how much he blinked his eyes, it refused to come into focus. The bed shifted under him and he turned his head carefully to the side. Even blurry, he instantly recognized Draco. He felt a strange regret, wishing his love’s hair was the natural soft blond instead of dyed black.
"Hey," Draco said softly.

Shadow jumped. He hadn't noticed his love’s eyes open. "Hey," he said back and blinked again. His voice was different and yet familiar. It'd been months since he'd heard Harry Potter's voice. He smiled. "It worked." The smile melted in concern. "Seraphim didn't come Out again, did he?"

"No," Draco reassured. "I'm here because we were afraid you may wake up as him."

"Good." Shadow sat up carefully, relieved when the pain didn't get worse. "How do I look?"

"Like you're squinting." Draco chuckled.

Shadow glared at him. "Well, excuse me. I think I need my old glasses."

"Come on. I'm sure Lupin will be able to help you." Draco stood and bit his lip to hide a smile when Shadow made a disgusted face as he noticed how his robes hung loosely around him.

"Great," Shadow grumbled. "Just what I needed. To get even shorter!"

Draco stood up and grinned openly when he realized he was now a good four inches taller than his friend.

"Oh shut up," Shadow growled, his two green eyes glowering up at him.

Draco dutifully swallowed his laughter and followed Shadow into the dining room where everyone was waiting. Remus and Sirius smiled in welcome. Severus studied him in a more scientific manner. Marissa, however, looked upset and confused. Her face was dark with a frown. Draco immediately moved over to her and scooped her up onto his hip.

"Hey. It's still Shadow, but he's pretending to be Harry Potter to help people. You understand, don't you, sweetheart?"

Marissa's light brown eyes regarded Shadow. "Angel?"

Two green eyes watched her back. "No. I'm not Seraphim. I'm still Shadow." Avoiding her disappointed look, he turned to Remus. "I need glasses. Do you think you could help me? Everything's really blurry, and it's giving me a headache."

"Of course." Remus stood and quickly came around to him. "Let me get a reading and I'll have Poppy order some. I assume you want them to look as much like your originals as possible."

Shadow nodded. "Thanks, Remus." He stood still as Remus pointed his wand at his eyes. The test took only a few seconds before he was released. He looked to his father. "So how long until I change back?"

"Eleven this morning," Severus answered. "Four more hours."

"Will it… ah… hurt as much?" Shadow asked carefully, attention on the food in front of him.

All eyes turned to Severus. The Potion Master shook his head, to everyone's relief. "Returning to your now natural form will cause pain, but not to the level of the first change."

"Good. I think I can handle this, then. Seraphim didn't come Out. The potion will be very useful."

Shadow smiled at the dour man. "Thanks, Dad."

Severus didn't respond to Shadow's gratitude, instead he sneered lightly and served himself some
eggs. Draco and Shadow shared a wry smile at this and followed his example. Some things would never change.

xXx

Severus felt numb and knew he'd descended into the cold way of thinking where he went when he had to make especially hard decisions. This time however it was to escape his churning emotions. He felt stripped bare and strangely like he had in his early Death Eater days. Watching the agony he inflicted on his son had taken him to a very dark place inside his mind.

"Honeysuckle," he said softly and the ancient gargoyle leapt aside.

He let the stairs carry him upward. The Headmistress's office looked similar to the days Dumbledore had occupied the space, but there were no funny pictures on the walls or instruments cluttering every surface. Minerva had installed shelves where such things sat in an organized manner. He pulled off the invisibility cloak of his son's. Minerva looked up with a tired air. Her face was lined with stress, but her eyes were hard and alert. She was a war-witch determined to protect her soldiers and take down the enemy.

"Thank you for coming, Severus." Her voice was even, but it vibrated with tension. "Emmeline Vance was compromised and murdered. Charlie autopsied her corpse and discovered they interrogated her before they made the killing blow. They asked about the Order and other members, but of course she was prevented from speaking. Then they questioned her hard on Harry Potter's location. She revealed that we believe he is in training in China. We believe they were rather desperate for this information, that Harry is their true concern, more so than the Order. Be careful, Severus. Make sure Shadow doesn't risk himself unnecessarily. The Dark Lord is ready to make his move on the Chosen One."

"Her wife?" he asked.

"Devastated," Minerva admitted and closed her eyes. "Lenora loved Emma very much. It doesn't help that when she fire-called funeral services, she was told that it would be a week before anyone would be able to get back to her, they are that busy."

"Dementors?"

"Yes. Now that they've built up their strength preying on Muggles, they have returned to Wizarding areas to hunt down more substantial food. We had the Daily Prophet print an article on the Patronus, but not many can perform the charm, especially without hands-on instruction."

Severus nodded, acknowledging the information.

Minerva regarded him solemnly. "Is there anything you can tell me regarding your strategy? It's not looking good, Severus."

"We are in the process of dismantling some of the defenses that surround the Dark Lord. Once that is finished, a full assault will be more likely to be successful."

"Then we will continue to buy you time."

Severus held her intense gaze apathetically before pulling on the invisibility cloak and moved toward the stairs.

xXx
Shadow looked up in relief when Severus entered his bedchamber. There were only five minutes left until eleven. The way everyone was standing around him reminded him of last night. The remembered pain sent his heart rocketing against his chest. He had to consciously take deep, steady breaths and remind himself that it wasn't going to be like that. It wasn't going to hurt that much. He closed his eyes and waited.

"Eleven-oh-five," Remus spoke softly from his corner.

Shadow's eyes popped open. "What? Really?" He frowned and looked to his father. "Does this mean that I'm supposed to initiate the change? That it won't happen automatically?"

"Possibly," Severus murmured, his brow wrinkled. "The potion always wore off on its own with the animals. Drinking the potion again would not return you to your normal state. It suppresses my genetic contribution, after all. The expiration time may be different due to your more complex anatomy, but I am unsure at this point."

Shadow nodded and closed his eyes. He was always Occluding nowadays, so it was easy to slip into the waterscape filling his mind. It looked the same. Green vegetation, bright coral, and even brighter exotic fish; he searched for any anomaly. It took him a moment to figure it out. The surface of the water was a sea-green instead of the deep blue of the rest of his mind. Instinctively, he knew it should match.

The green tint to the surface of the water must be reflecting his physical change. Mentally, he summoned a current to wash away the green water, returning his mindscape to the uniform blue. Pain echoed distantly in his awareness; the fish swam in tighter patterns and formations in response, but Shadow continued to Occlude until all the green was washed away.

Blinking open his eyes, Shadow felt sore and achy. Remus was hovering over him, muttering diagnostic and healing spells. He smiled when he realized that the werewolf was in sharp focus. His eyes were better again. He turned his head to the side and smiled at Draco. "Looks like I'm back."

"Yeah. You're back." The Slytherin smiled in obvious relief.

Shadow looked to his father who stood silently at the foot of the bed. "Guess I can control the change back. I think I would have stayed Harry Potter for as long as I wanted, but I don't think I can go back on my own now that I look like Shadow again. I'll need the potion."

Severus inclined his head. "I suspected as much."

"You check out okay," Remus reported. "No sign of damage, but you are magically and physically exhausted. I recommend a good meal and a nap."

Shadow scowled at that, but couldn't argue. He did feel tired. It was very annoying, however. It seemed like he was always in bed lately. He turned to Draco. "Wake me for DA, okay? It's at six."

Draco nodded. "Deal."

Shadow allowed his eyes to close, a frown still on his face, but that softened into a smile when he felt someone spell him dry and clean. The feel of the magic told him it was Draco.

xXx

The weekend past quietly in the school. The DA took advantage of the lack of classes and had two sessions a day, but they were extra careful not to get caught. Homework was done, Shadow spent time with Rogan, Miles, and Lillian, as well as some time with Neville. His brother seemed bothered...
by something, but whenever he asked about it, Neville promised that it wasn't anything important and that he was figuring it out on his own.

Severus attended more Order meetings now that he wasn't locked away working on his potions project. Shadow had tried to talk to Draco about Seraphim again, but chickened out twice. He couldn't bring himself to tell his friend what he discovered about the Peacock, either.

Marissa was excited to have the two teens' attention now that they had the snitch figured out. They were still researching the location of Hufflepuff's Cup and Ravenclaw's Diadem, but so far hadn't discovered anything about their current locations. Things were almost going too well until Sunday morning's Daily Prophet.

Demands for Protection Against the Dark

Finally Answered by Wizengamot

The Muggle Prime Minister arrived at the Ministry of Magic Saturday morning and refused to leave until he was promised results and protection from the magical disturbances and attacks happening on his people. The Muggle world dissolved into chaos as they assumed their Minister had been abducted by some unknown entity. Dangerous Muggle weapons were armed.

In response, the Wizengamot met with Minister Fudge and demanded to know what he planned to do to bring peace and order back to both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. Wizarding riots were at their peak this weekend causing a total of two hundred thousand galleons worth of damage. Aurors are being attacked and derided in the street, and death tolls are higher than they have been in decades.

Not satisfied with Minister Fudge's answers, the Wizengamot decided to remove him from office and temporarily appoint the Head of the Ministry Law Enforcement, Rufus Scrimgeour, as Minister of Magic until a more traditional election can be held. The new Minister is in the prime of his life and had only been recently appointed Head of MLE after the recent death of Amelia Bones. This reporter attended a secret press conference in which every newspaper was present. The new Minister had this to say:

"We have returned to dark times, but Britain and all the magical communities know how to handle the dark. We've survived war before and we will again. I recommend everyone calm down and think carefully. Survival is now of the utmost importance. Protect yourselves and your children. The Aurors have been hindered by bureaucracy, but no longer. I am declaring a state of emergency. Curfews are now in effect, as well as strict commercial laws. Buy only what you need, be careful of going into public alone, do not go out after dark. Anyone in violation of these rules will be arrested and brought in for questioning. I thank you all in advance for your cooperation. We will need to stand together in order to return peace to the streets and our lives."

The Muggle Prime Minister attended the press conference as well and was satisfied by what he heard and saw. He returned to the Muggle world and promised to do all he could to control the Muggle population and aid the Wizarding efforts to stand against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Both men felt confident that together, with the help of their communities, the dark will be brought to heel once more.

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There were various reactions to the article. For the students, most were presented with the fact that this wasn't a game. People were fighting and dying. Some of the students had already lost family and loved ones. The fact that the new Minister had declared Martial Law reassured them, but it also
frightened them.

Among the teachers, most felt that this was the best thing that could have happened, and in fact hadn't happened too soon. Fudge would have led them to their deaths. They hoped that Minister Scrimgeour would actually prove effective in this war instead of a hindrance.

Umbridge was perhaps the most angry. She worshiped Cornelius Fudge and felt the world had turned on him unwisely. She was determined to see the Ministry remain strong and whole while her beloved Minister was temporarily out of office. There was no doubt in her mind that come the election, Cornelius would be reinstated. She decided it was her duty to keep the Ministry moving in the direction Cornelius would have approved of.

To this end, Umbridge took a temporary leave of absence from Hogwarts to confer with the new Minister and to guide him. She was, after all, more experienced with the office of Minister than Scrimgeour, who had only recently been appointed Head of MLE. He would need her advice, and she was only too happy to provide it.

Chapter end.
What To Fight For

For some reason, cold clung to the dark chamber. Despite two huge fires blazing at either end of the hall, the walls and floor retained the winter chill. Voldemort smiled as he watched his trusted minions try to conceal their faint shivers, some with more success than others. Only two were truly immune besides himself. They stood front and center with unwavering devout gazes that burned with fanaticism and magic that had been stripped of inane rules and rationalism. Wild and untempered, power beat in their veins ready to be unleashed at his bidding.

"Lucius, Bella," he said affectionately, allowing his magic to activate their Dark Marks. The sharp pain only made them smile, their senses by this point so far twisted that it felt like pleasure. "You two will be my generals. It is almost time. Divide those here among yourselves. Lucius, you will handle the attack on Hogwarts. Be very sure the assault unfolds exactly as I've planned. Bella, you will lead the attack on Diagon Alley. Make sure those we need are brought before me alive. Train my soldiers well. I will not tolerate failure. You have two weeks."

"Yes, my Lord," they said in unison and bowed low before his throne.

Such pretties, Voldemort thought with pleasure. They were complete opposites. Lucius was tall, blond, and male. Bella was small, dark-haired, and female. Both were exactly what he wanted: obedient slaves. He smiled as he watched them turn and immediately began to cut through the crowd of one hundred and fifty. This was almost twice the number of followers than he'd had a decade ago.

It had taken him too long to regain his strength, but he'd learned from his mistakes. He had moved to hastily in the graveyard. He'd toyed with and underestimated his opposition. He would not do so again. He was Slytherin! He was Slytherin's Heir! It was time he remembered his old lessons, his old beliefs. Cunning was needed. Cunning and sheer ruthlessness. The Wizarding World thought they were at war. They hadn't seen what a true War looked like.

Soon he would control all the world. He would be the first true King of both Muggle and Wizarding Britain in centuries once he had control of that intoxicating, terrible power that he'd confronted in the graveyard. Voldemort breathed in deeply, red eyes smoldering as he stroked Nagini's warm coils. Her tongue danced in the air, smelling fear and anticipation in equal measures.

Soon, he promised himself.

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The first week of February passed rather quickly at Hogwarts. McGonagall was enjoying the absence of Umbridge. She, along with all the students, hoped Umbridge would decide to stay at the Ministry permanently. Carrow seemed to retreat now that her main support was missing. The tense air began to dissipate and soon there were laughs and pranks returning to the halls. This breath of fresh air touched all but the Slytherins.

Thursday found Shadow and Draco slipping into Rogan's room instead of attending the DA meeting. They were worried that Carrow's subdued behavior in class and in the halls meant that she was even worse in private. They'd slipped out of the Chamber while everyone else was at dinner to lessen the chance of being caught, but now they had nothing to do but wait for the Slytherins to return.

"You've been avoiding me again," Draco suddenly spoke up.
Shadow sighed. "Now's not the time to talk about it."

He looked out the window as a school of fish swimming by drew his attention. It wasn't fair to Draco, but he really didn't want to talk about it. There were only ten days before the next full moon. Every day that passed made him more anxious. He'd felt his scar bother him a couple times this week, but he refused to let Seraphim Out. He knew he needed to talk to Draco about it before it was too late. It was just hard.

Draco crossed his arms, his hip leaning against the desk. "No one's here," he pointed out.

He was getting tired of waiting for Shadow to find his words. During every meal, his friend avoided his eyes. During DA, Shadow was careful to find another partner. During the day, he was always busy studying either the fascinating things in the miniature libraries or Dumbledore's notes and theories on Tom Riddle and his power.

"But we don't know for how long." Shadow finally met his eyes. "What I need to talk about isn't going to be quick."

Draco nodded, accepting that. At least Shadow was admitting that they needed to talk. "So let's talk about Severus then. I understand he was busy working on your potion, but what's he busy with now? We still see very little of him."

"He has meetings with McGonagall." Shadow shrugged, but he couldn't quite hide his worry. "I'm sure he's working on something important for them."

"It's not like him to be so determinedly busy, especially when his family needs him," Draco argued. "I'm starting to suspect something may be wrong."

Shadow bowed his head, his arms coming up to wrap around his chest. He couldn't say it out loud, it felt disloyal somehow, but he agreed with Draco. It wasn't like Severus to be so inattentive. The last time they'd really talked was last Thursday when Severus had told him about the potion and encouraged Shadow to talk to Draco about his jealousy and anxiety. The only thing he could think of that would keep Severus away was Shadow himself. Maybe he was disappointed that Shadow wasn't handling things with Seraphim and Draco better?

A warm hand settled on his shoulder and he looked to the side to see that Draco had moved across the room silently. Draco smiled and squeezed gently. "I say we corner him. Maybe have Sirius tie him down while we run diagnostic spells."

"I don't think things are that drastic," Shadow answered with a wry smile. "Besides, I'm not feeling suicidal. Are you?"

Draco grinned, grey eyes bright with mischief. "That's why I said we'd have Sirius do it. While Severus is dismembering him, we'll have time to escape."

Shadow laughed. He was going to retort, but the bedroom door opened before he could. Rogan slipped tiredly into the room. The teenager froze when he saw that he had guests, but he relaxed when he realized who his visitors were.

Shadow quickly moved across the room and looked his friend over. "How are things?" he asked when he could see no physical evidence of pain. He accessed his empathy and stiffened, his two-colored eyes flaring open in shock.

Rogan was, to put it simply, deeply depressed. Resignation, despair, and lethargy weighed down his spirit and body, almost bringing tears to Shadow's eyes as he experienced the pervading emotions
intimately. He backed away, but distance didn't help. It felt like all his energy was being drained away, every ray of hope smothered.

Draco moved between them. Almost instantly, his empathy focused instead on his love. Fierce protectiveness burned through him and his focus sharpened with Draco's intent. It allowed him to regain control over his shields and he pulled them tightly closed.

Rogan blinked dully, oblivious to Shadow's distress or Draco's reaction. "What does it matter?" He moved toward his bed and sat down heavily. "Even if we get out of this place, we'll only be heading into worse. Either we'll be targets for the Dark Lord or we'll have to join him."

"That's only true if you let it," Draco snapped. "You're Slytherin. Out think your enemies and change the situation to your advantage."

"Oh, yes. Let me just wave my wand and vanish the war," Rogan drawled nastily. "Poof. The Dark Lord's gone. Poof! Carrow is dead."

Draco glared, outraged by the teen's attitude. They had fought too hard and too long to give up now. Unfortunately, Shadow stopped his words by placing a firm hand on his forearm.

"Rogan. What's happened?"

The teen's face seemed to crumple in on itself, his apathy evaporating as grief roared to the surface. Shadow moved forward instantly. He sat next to his friend and wrapped an arm around his shoulders as Rogan sobbed into his shaking hands.

"She... She made me... Oh, Merlin!"

"Take a deep breath. We can help you, but you have to tell us what happened," Shadow said evenly. He looked up at Draco.

Draco nodded at the dark expression. He would help make sure Shadow's promise wasn't an empty one.

Rogan took a deep, shaky breath and visibly tried to get control over his emotions. It took several minutes and, when he eventually spoke, his voice was hoarse and raw. "She had her favorites practice the Imperius Curse. Seventh year Darian Warrington... He..." Rogan closed his eyes, his hands fistig and pressing into them. "He Imperioed Lillian. He had her do a dance and start to take off her clothes. I... I couldn't let him do that to her. I... Merlin, I got on my knees and begged Carrow to tell him to stop. Sometimes that pacifies her. But... this time... she cast the Curse at me, and... and she had me tear Lillian's robe and shirt off. Then she... conjured a whip. I..." Rogan opened his eyes and looked up at Draco with despair. "I whipped her."

Shadow froze, his eyes wide and shocked.

Draco, however, held Rogan's gaze and asked calmly, "Was she treated? When was this?"

"Last night. Miles and I cleaned the wounds and wrapped rags around her back, but Carrow refuses to give us healing potions."

"I'm going to get something for her. I'll be right back," Draco told him. He glanced at Shadow, checking to be sure he was okay, before pulling the Invisibility Cloak around him.

Shadow drew Rogan's attention. "It wasn't your fault."
"I know," he answered softly, exhausted. "But that doesn't change the fact that I remember doing it. I remember her screams. I remember the way I could feel it in the handle when the leather struck her back."

"Rogan…"

"Nothing you can say will fix this. You can't do anything to stop Carrow."

"Maybe not, but maybe we can even the field. Give you some options," Shadow returned hotly. He remembered all the instances in his life where he'd been at the mercy of abusers. He knew what that was like. He may not be able to physically stop Carrow, but the emotional and psychological trauma was what caused the real damage not the physical attacks.

"What options?" Rogan rasped furiously. He gestured to the pendant he wore. "This? This didn't help!"

"I know it didn't." Shadow moved toward the desk and pulled out parchment and a Never-Out quill. "First, we need to think of a way to make sure you have access to healing potions. If Draco and I have to deliver you potions every day, we will, but what about a two-way cupboard. My father, Draco, and I will make sure it is adequately stocked. You can leave us messages inside if you need something more specific. Second, I think we should teach Occlumency to as many Slytherins as possible. It won't protect you from the Imperius Curse, but it will allow you to compartmentalize better and return a sense of control over your mind and emotions."

Rogan stared at his friend in shock. He'd felt helpless for so long, actually thinking of ways to fight back, even indirectly, seemed impossible.

Shadow smiled grimly as he saw his friend's expression. "Listen to me, Rogan. We may not have the power to kick her out or physically stop her, but we always will have power over ourselves. She can't take that unless you let her. You will survive her. Her time of power is limited. I promise that you will survive long enough to see her toppled."

Life slowly kindled in Rogan's hazel eyes. He reached out and clasped Shadow's hand. "Thank you."

Shadow smiled and nodded. "Now help me think of other ways to undermine her and protect everyone."

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"I would have to get permission from the Headmistress," Godric answered later that night when Shadow explained what he wanted.

"I don't think that will be a problem." Shadow considered how best to go about this. "Can you take her a letter?"

Godric nodded solemnly.

Shadow quickly sat and wrote a letter. He still didn't want to face McGonagall in person yet. In the letter, he didn't give too many details about why he wanted the special warding around Carrow. It would only upset her when she had other things to think about. It wasn't like she could do anything about Carrow. Umbridge still had an unfortunate amount of influence, but he hinted enough for her to get the picture that the Slytherins needed support.

Finished, he rolled up the parchment and handed it to the serious phantom. He still found it amusing
to think that the real Godric was more like Percy than the Marauders. Godric disappeared without a sound or a word of goodbye. Shadow shook his head, bemused.

The door to his room opened and Draco slipped in, eyes bright with excitement. "It worked!"

"What did?" Shadow asked, smiling. "You said you wanted to try something and just took off."

Draco moved into the room and sat on the bed next to Shadow. They both turned to face each other, one leg folded before them. Normally Shadow would feel anxious being so close to Draco, alone, on a bed, but he was too focused on the problem at hand to really bother with it. He crossed his arms and waited patiently for Draco to brag, which he most certainly would.

As predicted, the former-blond straightened and preened a bit. "The Room of Requirement is capable of quite a lot as we've seen with the DA. I've always been curious just how far the room could go to meet seemingly impossible demands."

"Uh huh… And?"

"What we need as much a secure place in which to teach the Slytherins is time."

"The room gave you time?" Shadow asked with a confused frown. He thought of Ginny and the way she accidentally turned herself thirty.

Draco grinned, very pleased with himself. "It most certainly did. I thought about the Slytherins and what we really needed to help them. It created a great little chamber, plain and unobtrusive so as not to distract from attempts at Occlumency. I stayed in there for fifteen minutes and walked out again. Only one minute had elapsed since I walked in. I did it again. This time I stayed for half-an-hour. Again, only a minute elapsed since I entered."

Shadow began to smile. "So now we have as much time as we need to practice defense as well as Occlumency, and all this without cutting into their sleep."

"Exactly."

"I talked to Godric. He helped Neville and I keep our movements about the castle at night away from Dumbledore. He said he could make her want to go to sleep by midnight and keep her that way until morning. As soon as she's out, those who want to come to the Room of Requirement can."

Draco smiled brightly. "I think this is really going to work."

"We just have to be careful that no one in Slytherin who approves of Carrow finds out. If they tell her when she's awake, I don't know what she'll do to the Slytherins in revenge."

"We'll be careful," Draco promised. "It's not like we haven't done this before. We'll just have a secrecy scroll like we do for DA. Only Rogan will be able to discuss the meetings."

Shadow nodded. "Sounds good to me. Your idea about the room was brilliant. I never would have thought to try that."

Draco flushed with pleasure. "Yes, well…" Shaking his head, his bright expression dimmed a bit as he regarded his friend seriously. "Now that we have this all figured out, do you think you can tell me what's been bothering you?"

"And people think I'm the stubborn one?" Shadow asked with a wry smile. "You can't let it go, can you?"
"I've let it go long enough," Draco snapped, stung. Now wasn't a time for jokes. "You obviously need to have it forced from you before you worry yourself to death."

Shadow sighed and closed his eyes. He leaned back against the headboard trying to marshal his thoughts. Draco waited patiently. When Shadow peeked at him, his friend was still determined to have this out now. "Fine." He sat up straight. "I'm still feeling unsure about your relationship with Seraphim. It upsets me that you won't help me think of ways to keep him locked away as much as possible. Even though I know he has to come Out for the full moon, I don't like that you don't share my feeling of regret over that."

Draco's eyes widened. He was completely startled that Shadow so bluntly revealed what he'd been avoiding for a week. He expected some build up, expected to need to pry it out of his lover some more. "Oh." He scrambled for something more intelligent to say. "I don't know what you want me to say." Shadow ran a hand through his curls in frustration. "I don't understand what you see in him. Why do you like spending time with him? Wouldn't it just be easier if he never came Out at all?"

"Maybe, but it's not that simple. Seraphim is sometimes difficult to handle, but he doesn't deserve to be locked away and forgotten. He suffered greatly. You suffered greatly. That deserves to be recognized. And if I can help him... you... then I will."

Shadow crossed his arms and scowled. "That's beside the point. I don't need help. Helping Seraphim isn't going to help me. He's always going to be insane. Him being Out are just days when I missed out on, days taken from me."

"That's not true and you know it," Draco snapped, angrily. "You know better than that, Shadow. Seraphim is you. You are the same person. Stop acting like he's totally unrelated to you."

"For all intents and purposes, he is," Shadow countered. "Listen to me carefully, Draco. I will never merge with him. I don't understand why you'd want me to. Who I am now would disintegrate. Is that what you want for me?"

"Shadow..." Draco was breathless. He reached out and pulled Shadow into his arms. "You sound like I'm your enemy. I don't want that for you at all. I don't even want you to change. I love who you are. But I realize that we are going change and grow. By the time this war is over, we're going to be different. We're going to keep growing up. Look, I don't want you to merge with Seraphim at the cost of who you are. I don't, but that doesn't mean Seraphim doesn't exist. He does. I'm just trying to provide him some comfort, because you deserve it. Because I love you. Even if you never merge, I feel like that will help you because you are connected. I can't stand the thought of him suffering because that is your suffering."

"You liked it when he..." Shadow took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of Draco, and decided to just jump off the cliff and be blunt again. "Are you attracted to Seraphim?"

Draco tensed and Shadow cringed. He pulled out of the embrace and carefully moved away, keeping his eyes downcast. "When he transformed and used his magic..." Draco's hands clenched. "It aroused me. The magic did. It intoxicated me because of its pure power and because it felt like you. Normally, Seraphim doesn't at all appeal to me in that way. He's like a damaged child. Even when he wrapped me in magic and I responded, it was you as you are now that I was picturing. My Shadow. My lover."

Shadow smiled as Draco reached forward and caressed his cheek. They stared at each other for a long minute before Shadow moved slowly forward and pressed their lips together as he whispered, "Good."
Draco felt realization strike him and he almost burst out laughing. Shadow was jealous! He couldn't stop his grin completely as he pulled Shadow more firmly against him and pillaged his mouth. When the kiss broke, they were both panting. Shadow had fallen back to lay on his back, Draco hovering over him on his hands, both their legs still falling off the bed. Shadow stared up into dark grey eyes and felt his heart skip a beat at the heat in that gaze.

"Do you need me to prove my feelings?" Draco asked, low and rough. He slowly lowered his head until he was close enough to nip at Shadow's lips.

The sting caused Shadow to gasp and reach up to pull Draco's chest flat against him. He arched up against the weight of Draco pinning him down, his whole body trembling with sensation and sudden heat. *God, this feels so good.* The thought sent Shadow's pulse rocketing with terror.

Draco saw the shift in his lover and he moved his weight to one hand, using his other to grab a fistful of black curls. He pulled, hard, making Shadow's chin tilt up, exposing his throat. Shadow's eyes focused on him and Draco smiled.

"Stay with me, love."

Shadow tried to nod, but the pressure/pain of Draco's hold wouldn't allow his head to move. "Yes," he whispered instead.

He drew his hands up and slipped them under Draco's button-down shirt. He felt the soft skin, the warmth of it, felt Draco's reaction to being touched, the blond pressing his erection harder against Shadow's thigh. Shadow's fingers flexed and he scratched down Draco's back, leaving welts. Draco arched, crying out at the sting, but it only made his eyes shine brighter.

"With you," Shadow promised.

The smile that lit his lover's face made something in Shadow ignite. He growled and thrust upward, drawing both their legs onto the bed and their hips into line. They both gasped. Draco released Shadow's hair and quickly worked on the damn buttons of Shadow's shirt. Shadow returned the favor by undoing Draco's.

Their hands were clumsy, but eventually they had the garments open. Draco leaned down to press their chests together. They arched, their skin sliding roughly. Shadow almost cried out and his fingers clamped onto Draco's arms. Draco responded by biting Shadow's shoulder, almost breaking the skin, and the fingers released with a grateful moan.

Draco licked the abused spot and pressed a gentle kiss there, knowing it would leave a bruise later. That thought was strangely exhilarating and he bit his lover again, lower. Shadow cried out, excitement and need in the sound. Draco grinned and continued downward, biting and soothing repeatedly. Shadow was squirming under him. The sounds being wrenched from him were utterly delicious. Almost in a trance, Draco unbuttoned his lover's pants as need and pent up desire overwhelmed him.

Shadow was in a haze of pleasure/pain, but the feeling of his button coming undone, of Draco's hot breath on his sensitive stomach had him bolting upright, drenched in terror. "NO!"

Draco was flung off the bed by a wave of magic, and he rolled, eyes wide and shocked. "Shadow?"

His love was huddled on the bed, shaking and pale. He looked like he'd be sick any moment.

"Shadow…" he said again, more gently. "Hey. It's okay. I'm sorry."
"Don't…" Shadow could hardly talk. He swallowed hard, the taste of bile flooding his mouth. "Don't…"

"I won't," Draco agreed quickly. "I won't do that again."

But Shadow was lost. He was rocking, silent tears drenching his face. "He'd do that. He'd suck and kiss, and it felt so good. I just let him do it as long as it was good. Just laid there and begged him not to stop. It felt good, so good. But I didn't want it. I didn't WANT IT. But I couldn't move, couldn't think past the pleasure. I couldn't move. I was his beautiful Kitten and Kitten liked it. Never felt that good before, but GOD HIS MOUTH WAS AROUND ME! That bastard would cum and cum while I was in his MOUTH!"

Draco yanked Shadow into his arms, disgusted and appalled. "Shadow, stop! Please. He's dead. He'll never touch you again. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, Shadow. Snap out of it. It's okay. It's just me. You're safe."

Shadow clung to Draco and sobbed.

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Draco lay propped up on his elbow staring down at Shadow as he slept. He could still see the tear-tracks and he tried not to hear his friend's broken rant repeat in his head. It was hard. The words were like poison. He wished he could eradicate them from Shadow's mind, eradicate what was done to him. He'd heard an echo of Boy in Shadow's little breakdown. It didn't have the same pitch of terror, but the grief was identical. And Shadow wondered how he could worry about Seraphim and want to make him better. They were the same person. This was perfectly clear to Draco. The same person that he would do anything for. It killed him to know that he couldn't protect Shadow from this, that it had already happened. Gently, he brushed a curl off his love's forehead. Just to touch him. He hoped Shadow wasn't having nightmares.

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Shadow knew he was supposed to leave the Chamber. He had something to do, but as he stepped across the threshold into Myrtle's bathroom, he froze wondering what in the hell he was thinking. Anxiety tightened his chest and he felt shaken as hot, sweaty fear uncoiled in his belly. People were out here. People who could hurt him. It wasn't worth it. Nothing was worth this risk. He'd be vulnerable out there. Who gave a fuck about duty? What in the hell was duty in the first place?

He wanted to dive back down the hole, back into the Chamber where he'd be safer. Not safe, he was never safe, but safer. He turned and found himself facing the Potions classroom. Carrow was there. The ugly witch threw her head back and laughed as she made her class boil themselves in their own potions.

See! Look what could happen to you if you let people around you! It was dangerous! Every hand was capable of striking out, every mouth capable of words that hurt. What was stopping them? Rules? Morals? Those could fall away without warning at any time!

As Shadow listened to the witch laugh at the screams of the class, he was drowned by a wave of rage. The only way to stop the hurt, to protect himself, was to remove the things that could hurt him. It was insane to do nothing. To let such a threat free to hurt him. And she would. They all would. Killing them was the only thing that would stop it. They wouldn't be allowed to hurt him anymore.

Darkness, thick as black tar, lashed out over the scene as he leapt forward, screaming a battle cry. And it felt good not to be afraid anymore, felt good to be taking back his power. He wouldn't let
anyone hurt him again! ... Shadow gasped and sat up quickly, covered in sweat, the dream slowly falling away from him.

"You okay?" Draco asked sleepily, very carefully not reaching for his friend.

"Yeah. Just a dream."

Shadow ran his hands through his sweat-soaked curls and shivered. It'd been weeks since he'd dreamed. This one wasn't like any he'd had before. It felt like what he imagined Seraphim was like, but those weren't Seraphim's memories or ideas. Seraphim didn't know Carrow, didn't know Hogwarts. That had to have come from Shadow's mind. Shadow flung his covers off and went to take a long shower, ignoring the worried grey eyes that followed him.

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Sirius stood with his friends at Grimmauld place. The Order's war chamber - the largest in the house - had been converted into a beautiful wedding chamber. The large table, the reports plastered on the walls, and the military air had been temporarily removed. Instead, winter flowers hung on the walls. Candles illuminated the shadows with gentle light. On one side of the room, Weasleys converged while on the other side stood Sirius, Severus, Draco, Marissa, Neville, Shadow (under an invisibility cloak), and Tonks' parents. At the front stood an alter with a white silk cloth.

Minerva stood there with a large, gilded spell book. She wore her royal purple Wizengamot robes. Remus and Nymphadora stood before her with clasped hands, a ribbon binding their hands together gently. Next to them, Bill and Fleur mirrored their position. Both couples were dressed in ceremonial robes of seven layers, each layer a shade lighter than the one on top. Bill wore dark green, Remus brown. Fleur wore blue with embroidery flowing along the trim and sleeves. Tonks wore red with elegant black embroidery.

Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Tonks, both wearing robes matching the embroidery on their daughter's gowns, were crying into handkerchiefs while the men in the crowd, all wearing classic black, grinned. The room grew silent as the two couples spoke solemn vows of wedlock, calling on their magic to recognize their commitment and bind them to their spouse for as long as they lived.

"All here have witnessed the pledges these couples have made to each other to be faithful in mind and body and to support each other materially and spiritually for as long as they have beating hearts. Do any present doubt the ability of these four to adhere to these vows?" Minerva asked with sharp eyes as she took in the group.

The gathered crowd remained silent.

"Then as a representative of the Wizengamot, counsel of the Wizarding World and guardian of magic, I hereby bind you to each other for the rest of your lives."

She lifted the spell book and activated one of the most ancient and revered spells. The words were foreign and beautiful, and at the end of the chant, the two couples gasped as their magic was pulled from them. The two ribbons glowed around their clasped hands. The four stood stiffly, their hair and robes flaring gently as the light sunk into their skin. When the magic faded, the two couples collapsed forward, the only think keeping them from falling was each other.

"I love you," Tonks said tearfully as she leaned against Remus's chest.

He smiled down at her and kissed her gently.

Bill grinned, holding Fleur. "You've made me the luckiest guy on the planet."
She clung to him and cried, her eyes bright with joy.

The room erupted into cheers. The Weasleys rushed forward to congratulate Bill and greet their new family member. Sirius stepped forward and clasped Remus on the shoulder as Tonks was swept into her parents' embrace.

"Good show, old boy. Can't believe you're finally married. It's about time!"

"Sirius." Remus blushed, looking tired. The full moon was in week and the binding had taken a lot out of him.

Neville moved up next to them. "Congratulations, sir. I'm so happy for you."

Remus immediately wrapped him into a hug. "I'm so glad Minerva let you come," he said warmly into his cub's ear. "It wouldn't have been the same without you."

Neville smiled, relief and happiness lighting up his face.

Sirius looked toward the back and saw his Heir hanging by the door with Severus. Draco’s face was composed and his posture regal, but if you looked closely, his fingers were in a strange position as he held his invisible lover's hand. The two teenagers had been distant from each other all last week, but Sirius was pleased that for the past two days Shadow had at least stopped ignoring Draco.

"Are they princesses?"

Sirius lifted Marissa onto his hip. The girl was wearing her best dress, the white one with yellow flowers that she'd worn the first day she went to Hogwarts. "They sure look like it, don't they?" He smiled at her and tapped her nose. "But I think there's only one princess in the room."

Marissa giggled and pressed her face against his neck.

"Come on." Sirius moved toward the back of the room. "Let's go see what Molly cooked up for the reception." As he passed Draco, he whispered, "Imagine someone else up there at that alter?"

Bright grey eyes flashed over to him. "Shut up, Sirius," he said calmly, but red stained his cheeks and his hand tightened around the air he held.

Sirius laughed and moved into the hall. The rest of the Order members were milling about, waiting to congratulate the two couples. Sirius frowned when he caught sight of a drawn-faced Lenora Vance. She was still grieving over the loss of her wife, but he was glad she'd decided to come to the reception. She needed to be around other people.

"Hello, Lenora. I've missed you terribly," he said gallantly, bowing. Marissa laughed as he dipped her with him.

"Hello!" the little girl echoed happily. "Sirius says I'm a princess."

Lenora's face relaxed into a true smile. "That you are, pretty girl. Why don't you have some cake?"

"Cake!" Marissa cried excitedly, her head whipping around to look for the promised treat.

Sirius chuckled. "Now look what you've done."

"Oh, go on. You don't want to spend your time talking to me." Lenora shooed them off, but she looked happier as he took his leave with another bow.
"We must go," Severus spoke in his ear.

Sirius almost jumped and couldn't quite swallow his startled cry. He turned and scowled at his ally. "Don't do that, Snape."

Severus sneered, his dark eyes reflecting the threat back at him. "I did not want to come in the first place. Let's go."

Sirius saw that Draco was a good bit behind him, waiting obediently. He wished his Heir didn't follow Severus so readily. "Very well. Let me just get this girl some cake and I'll be right behind you."

Severus nodded and moved toward the front door, ignoring the few greetings that were offered his way. They were sharing a portkey back to the Chamber and they couldn't leave without him.

Sirius sighed, wishing he could stay at the party. "No one knows how to have a good time anymore," he lamented.

"I do, Sirius," Marissa offered.

He grinned and tickled her tummy. "And that's why I love you so, my dear. You know how to appreciate a good piece of cake."

She squealed in laughter, making those around them smile.

Yes. This was exactly what they needed. It was too bad Severus was so stuck up his own arse that he couldn't see it. Well, he'd just have to make sure he grabbed enough cake that he could bring the party back with him. Draco and Shadow definitely needed a break and he wasn't about to let Snivellus take that away from them.

xXx

McGonagall had scheduled the small wedding to start at ten on Saturday, an hour after curfew. Neville had gone to bed right at nine and then snuck out at ten when Shadow had come for him with the invisibility cloak. The ceremony lasted just a little more than half-an-hour and Severus rushing them back to the Chamber had them returning to Hogwarts by eleven.

"Come on. You have an hour before your meeting with the Slytherins," Sirius coaxed. Half of one of the cakes Molly had baked was sitting on the dining room table.

Marissa was excitedly jumping up and down in her pretty dress. "Please, Draco! Please, Shadow! Have cake with us!"

Shadow glanced over at Neville. He did miss hanging out with his brother. "Well… I guess one piece wouldn't hurt."

"Yay!" Marissa cheered and rushed toward the table.

Sirius grinned and waved his wand, casting a spell the three teens had never heard before. Party music filled the room, seemingly coming from the very walls. He pulled Draco into his arms and spun him around. Draco scowled, but rather than fight the man and look like an idiot, he followed Sirius in a few steps before slipping free of his grasp.

"Come on! Let's party!" Sirius leapt for Neville and tried to spin him around the room.
The tall Gryffindor gasped and stumbled, almost taking them both down. "Wha-! Wait!" he cried, panicked.

Shadow laughed at his godfather's antics, which of course made him a target. Shadow back-stepped quickly and was rescued when Draco appeared at his side with two plates of cake. He took one eagerly to show Sirius that he had his hands full and couldn't dance. Sirius pouted, but then he pounced on Marissa. The little girl screamed in excitement and happily danced with the excited man.

"Thanks for nothing," Neville muttered, coming up to Shadow's side.

"I figured you could hold your own," Shadow responded with a smile. To apologize, he offered Neville his cake. The Gryffindor accepted it. Draco scowled at that, but Shadow ignored him. "I can't believe Remus is married."

Neville nodded. "But they look good together. She'll be able to coax him out of his shell."

"That's true."

"When will they know about the baby?" Draco asked softly.

"After this next full moon." Neville stared down at his cake with a worried frown. "If there's no evidence of the disease then, the baby is most likely uncontaminated."

Shadow and Draco exchanged a meaningful glance. They remembered their own intense fear when they thought Draco might be infected. Shadow had never felt such intense relief when Poppy's exam had revealed Seraphin's bite had not transferred the werewolf disease.

"I'm sure the baby is fine," Draco said reassuringly, more to Shadow than to Neville.

"What's with the long faces?" Sirius called loudly. He threw his arm around Shadow and Neville's shoulders and almost bent them in half with his full weight. "You promised me an hour to party!"

"You're right. We apologize," Draco said smoothly. He handed the Animagus his empty plate and bowed gracefully in front of Shadow. "Care to dance?"

Shadow blushed, his mind flashing to the time when Draco had tried to teach him to dance last Christmas. He didn't answer, but he allowed Draco to take his hand and pull him away from the wall. Shadow regretted the reaction he'd had the other night and wanted to make it up to his love. He also wanted to reassure Draco that he was no longer upset.

A strong, slender arm wrapped around his waist. The other hand came up to cup the back of Shadow's head, long fingers entwining among his curls. Blushing hotly, Shadow gently placed his hands on Draco's hips, feeling the Slytherin's prominent hip bones press against his palms. Draco rocked and Shadow followed the rhythmic movement. Music filled the room.

"Not bad. Looks like you've had a good teacher." Draco laughed as his hand dropped from Shadow's head to land gently on Shadow's shoulder.

"Careful, little lynx." He pushed away from Shadow and did a turn, his shoulders tilting forward as he did a little gyration that brought attention to his lean chest and abs. He reached out and spun Shadow before pulling him back into his chest, much closer than before.
"Fancy move." Shadow laughed, his eyes bright. He recalled what he'd read about peacocks, how they danced to attract their mate.

Draco had no idea why Shadow was laughing, but it thrilled him. His heart beat fiercely; his blood pulsed through his veins and filled him with an exhilarating strength. His senses became more acute. He could feel the gentle heat from Shadow's body, see the gorgeous sparkle of his amazing eyes. Elated, he spun Shadow again and skillfully dipped him before pulling him against his chest and grinding their hips together.

Shadow moved with him, his body falling into step with his own. It was the most incredible feeling, like they were on their brooms and racing side-by-side at insane speeds.

A gasp was heard, painfully reminding them that they were not alone in the room. Shadow's head snapped up, jerking away from Draco's descending lips. He just managed to catch sight of the door to the entrance of the Chamber closing on the back of his brother. Shadow felt the blood drain from his face and he yanked away from Draco as if burned.

Draco's eyes narrowed dangerously as he observed Shadow's reactions, but then he carefully blanked his face. "I'll go after him. I'll meet you at the Room of Requirement at midnight."

"No," Shadow said faintly, black crowding the edges of his vision. "No. Don't. You'll just make it worse."

"I won't make it worse," Draco said gently, eyes soft. "I give you my word." He hesitated, but then he followed through with his instinctive gesture and grabbed Shadow's hand. "Trust me like you did before."

Shadow’s face regained color as he was reminded of their fight in Draco's dorm room. He'd trusted Draco enough to let him take some of the burden Lockhart had left him to bear. Just like then, he stared into Draco's face, looking for something he couldn't quite name. And just like then he found what he was looking for. He nodded once, sharply.

Draco smiled, a fierce smile that revealed his pride, before he turned and left, following after the fleeing Gryffindor.

Shadow turned in the other direction, intending to retreat to his room.

"I'm sorry," Sirius said softly, cutting the music. His shoulders were slumped in defeat. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Shadow managed to dredge up a smile for his godfather. "It's not your fault. To be honest, this confrontation was going to happen sooner or later. I had fun."

Marissa ran over to him and hugged his legs. She was getting much better at initiating physical affection. "Are you sad?"

He ruffled her hair. "I'm okay. I'm going to get ready for the meeting Draco and I have later. Nothing's wrong."

"Cake?" she offered, stepping back and making her eyes wide with hope.

Shadow hesitated, but when he saw that Sirius still looked horribly disappointed, he relented. "Okay. One more piece of cake."

The little girl beamed happily. "Yay!"
Shadow took her hand in his. "Come on, Dog-father. Let's have some cake."

"Okay." Sirius moved to sit with the two, his smile reemerging.

xXx

Draco wasn't surprised when he found Neville only two hallways away from Myrtle's bathroom. The Gryffindor stood with his head hanging, his fist tellingly against the wall. Walking calmly, hands in his pockets, Draco approached the distressed teen. Neville was too caught up in his own head to notice. Sneering in disgust, Draco cleared his throat.

Neville jumped and spun around, terror clear in his eyes. When he saw it was only Draco, he relaxed and flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry for running out like that," he said hoarsely, eyes on the floor with shame.

"Why did you?"

Neville's head snapped up. His eyes widened in his already pale face as a hunted expression stole across his features. "I-I don't kn-know," he stammered nervously.

"I find that really hard to believe," Draco told him almost gently. The tone contrasted severely with the hard glint in his eyes. "I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt here. I'd recommend explaining why you've twice rejected Shadow or I might become a bit angry with you."

"I would never reject him!" Neville protested. His shoulders straightened and Draco was not pleased to discover the Gryffindor was two inches taller than him and at least twenty pounds heavier. Of course, that wouldn't matter if their wands got involved. Draco was unquestionably the better dueler.

"Funny, that's not what it looks like from my perspective. It's hard enough getting Shadow to accept the way we feel about each other. We don't need you making things worse. You better have a bloody good reason for what you're putting him through."

Neville winced and hunched over. "I don't mean to…"

"Maybe not," Draco cut in coldly. "But that doesn't matter. The results of your actions are all that matter, not your intentions."

"I…" Neville scratched absently at his forearms. "I was just taken by surprise when you… you…"


Neville turned a bit green. He backed away, shaking his head mutely.

"What's your problem, Longbottom? It better be good because I'm about out of patience with you. What exactly bothered you? The way I touched him?" Draco pressed ruthlessly. "Is that it? Did it upset you to see me almost kiss him?"

"Yes! Merlin, yes, just stop!" Neville screamed, covering his ears. "Yes. It bothered me. I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Draco stopped his advance, his head cocked to the side as he observed the shaking teen. He waited for Neville to calm down, for the shaking to almost stop before speaking. "I'm surprised the Longbottoms would feel that way. There have been several homosexual partnerships in your family tree."
"It… It wasn't my grandmother," Neville admitted, barely whispering. His eyes were clenched shut so that he wouldn't have to look the Slytherin in the face. His nails had broken the skin just above his wrists as he braced himself to reveal his disgusting past. He deserved this humiliation. For hurting Shadow. "It was L-Lockh-hart."

Draco froze, going perfectly still. Suddenly everything made sense: Neville's extreme reaction, the reason why the Gryffindor's opinion mattered so much to Shadow in this area, how the two of them had become close in the first place. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "What happened to you was horrific. I can't even imagine going through something like that. However, Shadow's trying to overcome the damage Lockhart left behind. I'm doing my best to help him, but your reactions to our relationship is making it worse. You're making Shadow feel dirty just as much as Lockhart did."

Neville gasped in horror. He'd never thought of it that way and putting himself in the same category as Lockhart in any way made him literally sick.

Draco watched impassively as the Gryffindor hunched over, hyperventilating. "I don't mean to upset you. If I could take back what you both suffered, I'd do it in a heart beat. Instead, I have to ask you for your help. You were strong when Shadow needed you before. Can you be strong for him again? I saw how hard it was to overcome what your grandmother raised you to believe about yourself. Trust me. I know what it's like to fight against your family's image of you. I had to break free of my father's mold as much as you have to break free of her's."

Neville looked up at Draco. His brown eyes were bloodshot, but his hands stopped shaking as he realized that Draco truly did understand. He nodded. "I'm sorry," he said softly but firmly. "I didn't realize. Of course I'll help you. I never meant to make Shadow feel like that. It isn't true. He's not dirty."

"Thank you." Draco flicked his wand, freshening Neville's robes and drying the sweat on the teen's skin. "That will mean a lot to him, coming from you."

"I mean it." Neville met Draco's eyes boldly. "I never thought you'd hurt him or that you'd be bad for him. You're a good friend to Shadow and I've always been glad for that. I just couldn't…" He took a deep breath. "I just couldn't see past what happened to me."

"Understandable." Draco offered a cool smile. "Better now?"

"Not really." Neville smiled wryly, self-hate in his eyes. "But I promise not to get upset over this in front of Shadow again. Even if you do k-kiss him. He really did look happy when you were d-dancing."

"Come down tomorrow. He's going to be broody until he sees you and knows you two are okay again."

Neville nodded. "I'll be there."

Draco inclined his head. "See you tomorrow, Longbottom."

"Goodnight," Neville answered tiredly.

xXx

Shadow looked up as Draco slipped into the Room of Requirement. His stomach squirmed with nerves as he studied his boyfriend's expression, but Draco was wearing a blank mask and he was too tense to try and look for smaller clues.
"What did Neville say?" he finally demanded.

Draco smiled and pulled him into a loose hug. "He said he was sorry. That he's glad we're together. He liked how happy you looked when we were dancing. He left because he's still struggling with issues of his own, but they have nothing to do with you. He's coming back down to the Chamber tomorrow night."

"Really?" Shadow felt his legs almost give out on him he was so relieved. "He really said all that?"

"I wouldn't lie to you." Draco kissed his cheek. "Neville is fine."

Shadow nodded once, firmly. "Good." He ran a hand through his messy curls and straightened his shoulders.

Draco released him and they walked over to the front of the room where a large bookcase full of defense tomes were shelved.

"Are you ready for tonight?"

"I'm looking forward to it," Draco admitted, his grin sharp. "It's about time we fought back."

The door opened across the room. Rogan, Miles, and Lillian stepped inside. They looked a bit haggard, all three standing stiffly due to injuries, but their eyes burned bright just like Draco's.

Shadow met them in the middle of the room. He clasped Rogan on the shoulder, pulled an excitedly smiling Miles into a hug, and shook hands with Lillian.

"I'm glad you guys could come."

"We're not the only ones," Rogan smiled slyly.

The door opened again and a group of second and third-years slipped in. Shadow looked at Rogan questioningly.

"I told them to come ten minutes after us," he answered easily.

Thirty minutes later, everyone who was coming was present and the room sealed itself shut, beginning the time magic. When they decided to leave, it would be twelve thirty at night no matter how long they stayed. Shadow stood at the front, facing the small crowd. Draco stood next to him, his expression exuding strength.

"I thought we'd work on dueling and defensive magic first," Shadow began. "Occlumency is easier to learn when your magic is exhausted since you need to learn how to discipline your mind without your magic to truly master the art. Split into pairs and duel. Draco and I will be walking around and taking notes on how far along you are and what you should work on here to best help you."

There were nods of agreement and the Slytherins split into pairs. Luckily there was an even number: twelve. Two second-years, Malcolm Baddock and Graham Pritchard, third-year Alexander Bole and forth-year Miles Bletchy, forth-years Lillian Derrick and Rogan Harper, fifth-years Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, two sixth-year Chasers Cassandra Pucey, a Prefect, and Hammond Urquhart, and seventh-years Adrian Pucey, also a Prefect, and Patricia Vaisley, who played Keeper.

Shadow and Draco walked around the room, observing with a quill and parchment as they took notes. An hour later, they called a halt and set the group to doing specific drills. The older group was told to practice shielding silently while the younger group was told to practice certain offensive hexes, curses, and charms against them.
Shadow was surprised at first that everyone obeyed so readily. He expected some resentment from the seventh and sixth years at least because he was younger than them, but there were none. Everyone was silent and grim, focused only on working hard. Age and other such things were no longer important when faced with true enemies. All that mattered was that everyone got better at protecting themselves.

Another hour later, at what felt like two thirty in the morning, all the Slytherins were exhausted. Shadow had them all sit in a semi-circle cross-legged in front of him. Draco joined the circle, also wanting to learn how to Occlude. Shadow took a deep breath and remembered how Severus had taught him. He vividly recalled the feel of Severus's mind, the soothing waves, the breathing exercises, and the sense of finding his center once he figured out what they were doing. It was the most incredible feeling and the memories of those lessons were some of his best.

"I want you all to concentrate on your breathing. Consciously take control of every breath. Breath evenly, deeply. Cut everything else out of your awareness."

Shadow opened his eyes and studied the thirteen Slytherins in front of him. He watched carefully, his own breath even and controlled. He waited for each one of them to reach that still place. Now all he had to do was turn on the light, so to speak.

"Think of a comforting image. It can be the ocean, the sky, a burning fire, a room, an object. Whatever you choose, picture it in detail." He waited another moment and asked around the circle what they were picturing.

"A sailboat," Rogan whispered.

"How big? What color? What does the wood feel like? How many rooms underneath the deck? Is the sail full of wind? From which direction? Is the boat moving quickly or sitting still? You have to build the image in as much detail as you can," Shadow explained.

"A library," Daphne revealed.

"How many books? Is there light in the room? What type of wood are the shelves made from? Is there carpet? Can you see the walls at all? Can you see the ceiling?"

He went around the circle, pushing them to think in more and more detail, bringing the image to life. Draco was last. "The Forbidden Forest."

Shadow blinked in surprise at the earthy image, but he dutifully asked questions to sharpen the visual image.

"Okay. Everyone did really well tonight. If you had trouble seeing the image you chose tonight, don't worry about it. It will get easier the more you practice. And you might find a different image coming to you later. This will take time."

"Thank you," Rogan said with deep sincerity. He spoke for all of them and pulled Shadow into a hug. "We really appreciate this."

"It's no problem." Shadow smiled happily around at them. "I need the practice as much as you guys. See you tomorrow."

He talked to them all as they left the room to sneak back to their beds. Draco would have been next to him, but he was in the corner talking quietly with Blaise. Shadow knew that Blaise was one of Draco's best friends and he missed him, so he let them be and waited patiently for them to finish.
About twenty minutes later, Blaise gave Draco a hug, nodded at Shadow, and slipped out of the room.

"That went well," Draco said, coming up to him.

"Yeah. It did, but they were a lot more subdued than I expected," Shadow confessed as they made their way toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"They'll get better as we have more sessions."

"Let's hope so."

xXx

At breakfast Sunday morning, Hermione sat at the Gryffindor table and just stared in disbelief at Umbridge. The squat woman stood in front of them beaming like an insane clown as she told them that their families have sent you here so that you would be protected.

"The new Minister is vastly worried about the safety of those in this school. You're families have sent you here so that you would be protected," Umbridge continued. "This may seem extreme, but it is for the best. The Ministry needs to know which of you are more vulnerable than others. Now, seeing how large a school Hogwarts is, I'm going to need help with the Heritage Registry. Professor Carrow has recommended students she deems the most capable and responsible."

A good majority of the upper class Slytherins stood with almost identical smirks.

"These fine men and women are the Inquiry Squad. They will help me brew the Lineage potions that you will all be required to take and help me make files on all of you to deem how much non-Wizarding blood can be found in your ancestry. The Minister, even now, is having a press conference informing the rest of the Wizarding World that they are required to come forth and register their magical lineage."

"How could the Minister approve this?" Hermione asked faintly, hands gripping the table, turning her knuckles white.

"It makes a weird sort of sense," Lavender protested weakly.

"If you don't think that list is going to instantly fall into the hands of Death Eaters, you're delusional," Hermione hissed furiously. "They're not protecting us, they're making us sitting ducks!"

"What are we going to do?" Dean asked desperately.

Hermione had no answers.

xXx

The first Shadow and Draco heard of the Heritage Registry was when they went to DA at nine-thirty to find Ron holding a sobbing Hermione. Sharing a worried glance, the two Slytherins hurried over.

"Not only did they record that I'm a Muggleborn, but they demanded I list the addresses and names of my immediate family. When I refused, Umbridge had two Slytherin thugs hold me still as she poured Veritaserum down my throat!" Hermione explained hysterically. "Now everyone's going to know where they live! They're not safe and it's all my fault!"

"Hermione, it's going to be okay," Shadow soothed. "If they are blocking the owls, then I'll get a
message out somehow. You can write them a letter, telling them to move."

The distressed girl shook her head. "They won't believe me. They're not just going to leave their homes on my say so. They don't really understand magic. They don't understand the danger!"

"We'll think of something," Draco argued. "We always do."

DA dissolved after only an hour due to the many Muggleborns and Halfbloods being too distressed to concentrate. Shadow and Draco left the room and hurried down to the Chamber. They found Sirius coming out of Marissa's room after tucking her in for the night. He smiled at them, but that quickly disappeared when he saw their serious expressions.

"Have you seen Severus?" Shadow demanded.

"I think he's in a meeting with Minerva," Sirius offered. "What happened?"

Draco explained what Hermione had told them as they walked into the dinning room. Sirius stared with an open mouth, aghast.

Shadow sat silently in a chair, his hands rubbing at his face tiredly. "We have to finish this war soon or there's going to be nothing left after this is over."

"Well, if they do plan on protecting the locations of the Muggle families, then they might actually catch some Death Eaters," Sirius offered, but he didn't sound convinced.

"So the Ministry is using the non-magical families of wizards and witches as bait?" Shadow demanded, eyes dark with fury. "You think that's going to work? What kind of statement is that, anyway? It's like the Ministry agrees with Voldemort that Purebloods matter more."

Sirius winced. "When you put it that way…"

"There's no other way to put it," Draco agreed, fists clenched. "Shadow's right."

"And where is my father?" Shadow exclaimed, slapping the table hard. "What the fuck is he doing that's so important that he's gone all the damn time?"

Sirius blinked. He knew Severus had been absent a lot, but he hadn't realized just how much that was effecting his godson. "I'll go track him down. Don't worry. You guys just go up and teach your Slytherins. When you come back down, he'll be here."

Shadow smiled. "Thanks, Siri."

"Don't worry about it, kid." Sirius stood and turned into a dog. He barked once and took off for the entrance of the Chamber.

Neville passed him on the way in and lifted an eyebrow. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Shadow denied and then smiled at his brother. "I'm glad you could come down."

"The creepy feeling that I'm being watched has let up a bit," he offered with an excited grin.

"Good. Are you hungry?" Shadow called for Omi and they all asked for something to snack on. He glanced at the silent Draco curiously, but he merely looked back at him passively. Turning his attention back to Neville he asked, "Tell me about Umbridge's registration. How is everyone reacting?"
"There's mixed feelings. Some of the naïve ones believe it might protect them, but most of the Muggleborns have realized that it actually makes their family vulnerable." Neville sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not good, really. But what can we do?"

xXx

Despite Sirius's promise, Shadow didn't see his father until the next morning when he woke up and went looking for him. He found Severus asleep in his bed. That didn't stop Shadow from storming up to him and demanding in a loud voice if they could talk.

Severus sat up, eyes wide and wand aimed, startled by his son's voice. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded lowly.

"Trying to talk to you. Was that not obvious?" Shadow sneered and crossed his arms.

Severus's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Remember to whom you are talking."

"Oh, my memory is a little foggy," Shadow drawled sarcastically. "Who are you again? I thought you were my father, but I could be mistaken."

Severus flung the covers off and pulled on a robe before stalking out of his bedroom. "I don't have time for this childishness."

"No. You just don't have time for this child," Shadow corrected coldly.

Severus froze halfway down the hall. He turned to see Shadow standing in his bedroom doorway, eyes bright, hands shaking though he tried to hide it by balling them into fists at his side. Severus wanted almost desperately to go to the teen, to sit down and talk to him, but there was something cold and determined preventing him from taking that small step forward.

"I will speak to you later," he grated, confused and sweating.

"I've heard that before, I think," Shadow answered softly. "Is that all you have to say, because it's pretty worthless."

Severus sneered and spun. He limped down the hallway, his old injury acting up. He didn't look back once, so he never saw the deeply pained expression on his adopted son's face.

xXx

Draco walked into the study and frowned at his love. Dark circles lay under his eyes and he was paler than normal. Worse than that, his cheeks were sharp in his face, attesting to a loss of weight. Shadow looked fragile despite that fact that he was on his feet, standing resolutely as he verbally attacked a ghost.

"I don't care about your stupid promises from centuries ago! The person you made it to is dead!" Shadow snarled. "I need to know about the Diadem and you're going to tell me. If you don't, you'll be failing your prime directive of protecting this school! What do you think is going to happen to Hogwarts if Voldemort wins?"

"I promised to keep it secret," Rowena repeated sorrowfully. "It is too powerful for just anyone to possess."

"I'm not going to use it, you daft bint!" Shadow practically shrieked. "I want to destroy it."
"Though it is too powerful to be used by most, that doesn't mean I want my Diadem destroyed." Rowena glared hotly at the teen before her. "Only those who can find my Diadem may possess it. You must find it. I cannot just had you that knowledge. It must be earned."

Shadow lunged, but the phantom disappeared before they made contact. The teen hit the desk hard and sent it toppling. Draco hurried over and helped his friend to his feet. Shadow didn't so much as thank him before storming from the room. Draco followed him, sighing. It was time for DA. At least they'd be able to duel and burn off his frustrated energy. And if DA wasn't enough, they had the meeting with the Slytherins afterward.

xXx

"Are you crazy?" Sirius demanded when he caught up to Severus after a meeting with Minerva. He didn't care a whit that he was walking through Hogwarts in his human form. This was way more important than worrying about Umbridge or Carrow seeing him. "I thought you were committed to your son. Why the change of heart?"

"What I do is none of your business, Black," Severus snarled nastily.

"He's my godson and you're hurting him! It damn well is my business!"

Severus spun and pinned the lanky man to the wall with a wand at his throat. "I won't warn you again. Stay out of my way or I will not hesitate to kill you."

Sirius stared shocked. The cold darkness in Severus's eyes was undeniable. The man wasn't lying. He was prepared to kill him. Swallowing, Sirius nodded and did nothing as Severus stormed away. He didn't try to follow or call out to him again. All he knew was that something was happening to Severus and he was no longer safe to be around or to trust.

"How am I going to tell Shadow?" Sirius mumbled miserably. His godson wasn't going to handle this news very well. Transforming into a dog, he went to the one place where answers and help might reside. He ran to Moony's quarters.

xXx

Severus stood in the parlor at their home. He gestured to the couch where Shadow normally sat. He entered eagerly, only to freeze when Severus moved forward with surprising speed and slapped him hard across the face. Shadow staggered and stared with wide eyes at the man he had come to trust with his life, with his mind. Terror swirled up from his gut and it dropped him to his knees as he flinched back and away from the man before him.

"I won't hurt you. Trust me," Severus murmured in his soft, deep voice.

Shadow shook his head violently. No. It didn't matter what Severus said. Nothing he could say would change facts. Severus was a man, with hands and feet and wand. All three of those things could be used to hit him, hurt him. Nothing was stopping Severus from beating him except a few measly promises and emotions that were subject to change. No one could be trusted. Words could never be trusted. Every hand was capable of hurting him. It was only a matter of time.

Severus lifted his wand and Shadow screamed, so terrified that he could hardly think. His whole body went so rigid he knew he'd shatter if anything or anyone touched him...

"Shadow! Shadow!" Draco called desperately.

The teen sat up with a gasp, eyes wild.
Draco continued to murmur soothingly, coaxing Shadow's breath to even out and the hysterical light in his eyes to dim. After about fifteen minutes, Draco asked carefully if he was all right.

"Yeah," Shadow grated hoarsely. He smiled tearfully over at Draco. "Thanks for waking me."

"No problem."

Shadow ducked his head. "Sorry I woke you."

"It's okay. I wasn't having the best of dreams, either." Draco sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "It's almost dawn. Might as well get ready for the day."

Shadow nodded, not wanting to go back to sleep in the slightest. "I'm going to take a shower."

He slipped past the blond. Draco had Madam Pomfrey strip the dye out of his hair since his roots were really starting to show. Draco had said that he looked ridiculous and refused to leave it that way. Shadow had laughed, which only made Draco more determined to fix it. They didn't have more dye, so Draco had it removed completely. In the end, Shadow was glad to have Draco’s blond hair back. It was a very unique and beautiful color. Not to mention, it was just so Draco. It fit him.

Shadow stood under the warm spray and could no longer distract himself from thinking about the dream. He didn't understand why he was dreaming again after so long without dreams. It had been nice and he really missed the peace.

He dressed quickly and strode toward the dining room. Draco was already seated, his hair damp and curling slightly on the back of his neck. Shadow smiled and reached forward to smooth the wet locks. Draco looked up at him in surprise. Shadow shrugged and sat next to him. They drank tea quietly. They were on their second cups when Omi popped next to Draco's chair.

"For young Draco from Master," the elf said solemnly.

Draco shot a look at Shadow, seeing the teen's shoulders tense, and took the envelope. "Thank you, Omi."

Omi bowed and disappeared with a crack.

Shadow moved his chair closer and read over Draco's shoulder as the Slytherin carefully opened the letter.

Draco,

I have discovered certain sensitive topics to be repugnant to me and have avoided them zealously to save myself discomfort. At first, I believed this strange anxiety stemmed from an outside source and tried to counter the influence. However, after a deep meditative investigation, I concluded that my new desire to avoid certain subjects is at my own instigation.

To protect myself, I have disallowed myself to think about or be around certain vital people. It seems that I have done this to protect information from getting to the Dark Lord. The Dark Mark unfortunately connects me to Him. The long silence and lack of torture through this device should have clued me in sooner to the insidious mental probes that even I have been unaware of.

I am certain that my Occlumency has protected the most precious information that I hold, but the shields are weakening and the only way to keep them intact is to disallow certain subjects to be brought to the surface of my thoughts. To this end, I cannot reside with you any longer. Be safe. I will continue to provide assistance as much as I am able.
Severus Snape

Shadow sat back heavily in his chair. "So that's it." Severus couldn’t be around him because then the Dark Lord could access thoughts connected to Shadow and that was extremely dangerous.

Draco studied Shadow's expression. "Are you okay?"

"It's just another reason to hurry up and off the bastard," Shadow answered darkly.

"We'll destroy him, Shadow." Draco reached over and gently squeezed his shoulder. "Severus will be fine. You know how capable he is."

The curly-haired teen nodded and said nothing else throughout breakfast.

xXx

Wednesday, after Transfiguration, Viktor asked Hermione to stay after class. She fidgeted and kept her eyes down, her cheeks hot with nerves and shame. Once the last student was gone, Viktor strode over to his girlfriend and pulled her into a hug. Hermione melted into the familiar and comforting presence.

"It has been many nights since you've come to visit me," he murmured into her frizzy hair.

"I know," she choked out, tears in her voice.

Viktor pushed her away so he could looked down into her face, his dark eyes worried. "What is the matter, Herm-inny."

She laughed and shook her head.

"Is it this Registration?" He brushed her hair away from her face and stroked her hair soothingly. "We will think of a way, yes? To protect your family."

"Oh, Viktor!" She flung her arms around his neck and sobbed. "I've just been so confused. So many bad things are happening. It's all happening so fast. Everyone's so afraid. They all look to me in the DA to help them and it's so overwhelming."

"Shhh…" he soothed. "It will be well."

"No. It won't." She pulled away and turned her back. Taking a deep breath, she faced him with a pale face. "I kissed Ron. It just sort of happened. He told me he loved me and we were so tired from DA… I don't know. We just kissed."

Viktor stared at her, shocked. "You love him?" he finally asked.

"I don't know." She began to cry. "He's my best friend. We've been through a lot together, but I love you. You're intelligent and love reading; you're so sweet and protective. I just don't know what to do!"

"I don't like this, you kissing other boys," Viktor admitted painfully. "You are beautiful, Hermy. I love you. I came here to be with you, but I want you to be happy. Don't worry so much about this, I think. Follow your heart."

She began to cry even harder.

Smiling sadly, he brushed his fingers along her wet cheek. "I always will be here for you. Come
when you want to see me. If you want this boy, tell me and we will be friends still."

Hermione leaned into his open arms and cried against his chest. "Oh, Viktor! I still love you."

He smiled. "Then nothing is wrong. Don't cry." He pushed her away again and pulled out a handkerchief. "Here. Clean yourself. You must go to class soon."

"I'll come by tonight," she promised, feeling very unworthy of his affection. "I've missed talking to you."

"I will be waiting," he promised.

She stood on tip-toe to kiss his lips. Hurrying from the room, she struggled to calm her breathing and cool her raw face. She was almost to Charms class when Ron found her.

"There you are!"

"What's up?" she asked, blushing.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quickly and started walking again. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Hagrid's back and he wants to see us as soon as possible."

"What?" Hermione stopped and stared at her best friend. "Well, let's go!"

Ten minutes later they were following Hagrid into the forest. He grinned proudly as he described how he had managed to convince the giants to stay away from humans, including Voldemort. They would not help in the war again. Hermione praised him profusely. This was very good news indeed. Her enthusiastic comments cut off abruptly when they came upon a small clearing with a young giant tied to a massive tree.

"This is Gwap. He's me baby brother!"

Ron could only stand with mouth agape at what Hagrid had done. Hermione grabbed onto her friend, almost fainting dead away.

xXx

The rest of the week passed in a blur for everyone. Studying, researching the last Horcruxes, classes, meals, avoiding Umbridge, Carrow, and the Inquiry Squad, attending DA, or the Slytherin meetings; every hour of the day seemed accounted for. Not a minute went by that wasn't full of activity. The week went so fast that Shadow was almost shocked to realize that it was Sunday, the night of the full moon.

"I have to be Remus, so I won't be here," Sirius said regretfully. They were all sitting around the dinning room table. Marissa sat next to him with Draco and Shadow on the other side.

"That's probably for the best," Draco said softly, eyes on the very tense Shadow. "Seraphim probably wouldn't appreciate you hanging around. He doesn't trust people very easily."

"Should I take Marissa up to Remus's room with me?"

"Yes," Shadow answered at the same time Draco said, "No." They looked at each other. Shadow was scowling with his arms crossed and an angry frown creasing his features into a harsh expression.
Draco merely raised his eyebrow calmly.

"Angel? Going to see angel?" Marissa interrupted their stalemate. Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

Shadow sunk down into his chair. He felt like hexing them all or throwing something against the wall just to see it shatter. It wasn't fair. There had to be a way to keep Seraphim from coming Out.

"Shadow," Draco spoke carefully, shooting Marissa a suppressive glance. She obediently quieted down, but her eyes still shone. "He thinks Marissa and I are part of his pack. I think he'll especially want both of us near in his werewolf form. It would be better if Marissa stayed with us than to have Seraphim go running around the castle looking for her."

"We could knock him out with the Draught of Living Death," he muttered darkly.

"Trust me. Nothing like that will work to stop the change," Sirius argued. "Moony's tried it all."

Shadow grimaced. "Fine. It's not like I get a say in the matter." He stood abruptly and left the table, stalking out of the room toward the entrance.

The three of them sat quietly until they heard the harsh notes of the piano echoing through the walls. Sirius winced. Marissa looked back and forth between them, a confused look on her round face. Draco sighed and took pity on her.

"Let's go to bed, sweetie. Say goodbye to Sirius. He'll be back in a few days."

Marissa got on her knees to kiss Sirius's cheek. "Bye, Sirius. See you soon."

Sirius hugged her tightly, pulling her into his lap and against his chest. "Bye, pet. Don't have too much fun without me." He ruffled her hair before setting her gently on her feet.

Draco stood and offered his hand. She came around the table and took it with a wave over her shoulder for Sirius. They walked silently toward her bedroom. Once there, Draco helped her get into her pajamas and tucked her into bed.

She smiled at him sleepily, enjoying his attention. "You're happy to see Angel again, right?"

Draco fussed with her covers, stalling while he thought of an answer. "I'm glad I get to spend some time with him. I know he sometimes gets afraid and angry, so I like to make him feel better."

Marissa nodded and yawned. "We'll make him feel better."

Draco smiled and brushed a loose lock of hair off her face. "Go to sleep. You're going to need to be rested if you're going to see Seraphim tonight." It was only early afternoon, but Draco had a feeling they had a long night ahead of them.

She smiled and snuggled deeper into her blankets, her eyes already closed. "G'night, Draco."

"Night, sweetie."

xXx

The sun set in a spectacular winter sunset. Those that were out stopped to stare in awe at the dark reds, oranges, and pinks that splashed across the cloudless sky. However, the enjoyment of the display turned to discomfort as the sun slipped closer and closer to the horizon, erasing the softer colors and leaving the sky a disturbingly blood red. Some shook off the feeling of foreboding, but others gathered their things and family and decided to have a quiet night at home. These few
individuals would soon learn just how smart that decision was.

Chapter end.
First Battle

As soon as the last hint of light was gone from the sky, Bellatrix and four other Death Eaters stormed into the Leaky Cauldron on Diagon Alley. They were swathed in layered black robes and blank white masks that cast terror in the hearts of all who saw them. Bellatrix cackled madly, her voice high and delighted, as she cast the Cruciatius Curse on the innkeeper Tom. He convulsed on his back like a flailing beetle, unable to right itself. Customers screamed and ran for the nearest exit only to be literally cut down. Blood spilled and screams tore through the air.

"Let's bring the house down, boys," Bellatrix called feverishly.

She twirled once, breathing deeply the copper scent, before striding through the inn, leaving her soldiers to finish the job as she slipped into Diagon Alley proper. Screams and shrieks of terror filled the street from several key locations. Bellatrix laughed, dancing as if to the most beautiful music. She and her squad of thirty-five Death Eaters would have a merry little time demolishing all that was in reach.

Bellatrix turned the corner and saw McNair - she knew him due to his remarkably broad shoulders - bent over a hysterical witch. He was thrusting madly, magically lashing her back bloody as he raped her. The rest of those in his group were burning a robe shop down. She was delighted to hear the agonized cries of the people locked inside. She wished she could linger, but she had her own mission to accomplish. Instead she called out encouragement as she passed

A child of about five ran in front of her. Blood was spattered across his face. His eyes were wide and horrified. He was running blindly, panic-stricken. Without warning, a grey-furred nightmare of teeth and claws leapt from a dark alley and landed on the child, swamping him. The terrified screams became agonized shrieks as Greyback feasted on his favorite meal.

Half the street was burning now. Throwing red and orange up into the sky for miles around in a sick parody of the fabulous sunset from an hour ago. Not even fifteen minutes had passed and most of Diagon Alley was destroyed. She laughed loud and long with pure exhilaration at the destruction. It was so easy, so beautiful. It was the natural order of things to fall apart, to break down.

Her girlish dance came to an end in front of Ollivander's Wand Shop. Powerful wards surrounded the store. Bellatrix pulled out a small box from her pocket. It was a gift from her Lord. She placed it on the doorstep and backed away, excitedly casting an opening charm.

Insidious Dark magic spiraled out of the box and ate at the wards protecting the store. Bit by bit, the powerful magic degraded the edges and corners of the wards until they collapsed into a static field of worthless energy. Cracks of multiple Apparations sounded nearby. Bellatrix giggled to herself, knowing the pathetic Aurors were way too late.

She flung the door open in an excited rush. The old man was waiting for her and cast something white and sharp. She blocked it and lashed out with a Whipping Curse. Ollivander was pulled over his counter by an invisible leash around his neck. Blood spilled from the delicate cut, soaking his throat and front of his robes in seconds. Bellatrix bent over him and removed her mask, revealing manic eyes and an insane grin before blackness consumed his consciousness.

xXx
Seraphim screamed as his body was twisted and broken, forced into a new shape. It felt like hours went by while skin, bone, and muscle were stretched and pulled to accommodate his new form. Finally the pain slowly abated, leaving him a panting mess on the floor. The Black around his head swirled in agitation and his wings moved weakly, sore even still.

Smell came back to him first. He was hit with the scent of some large dead, venomous creature, the lingering smell of four human males, and his soon-mate and fledging. It reminded him of their existence and he quickly lifted his head. His soon-mate crouched a few feet away, making soothing sounds.

He whined low in his throat and the smaller male hurried forward. He offered a cup full of liquid and the clean smell of cool water hit his senses, driving him to whine needily again. His soon-mate helped him drink. The liquid brought strength back to his limbs and he rose into a careful crouch, his wings out for balance as he took in the new place.

Confusion had him tilting his head, his wings bunching up on his back. Why were they not at their safe nest? Why were they in this warren? He no longer smelled the fog-predators, but the smell of death was just as unpleasant, not to mention the fact that humans had been in this warren recently. He growled at his soon-mate, asking why they had moved from their nest.

The smaller male made unintelligible sounds that Seraphim promptly ignored. Obviously his soon-mate was feeling uncommunicative. That was okay. He'd take care of them. He sniffed the air and instantly found what he was looking for. Their fledgling was close. He moved toward one of the openings and deeper into the maze-like warren.

He passed many openings. Some had obstructions blocking the way, some were open invitingly. The smell of two humans was strong here. He quickened his pace, worried for his fledgling. He came to an obstruction, but was certain what he sought was behind it. The Black rose beside him, sharpening into deadly points, but he hesitated when his soon-mate cried out. He watched carefully as the male edged past him and did something that made the obstruction swing away.

Seraphim cooed in pleasure, proud of his clever little soon-mate. His wing brushed along the male's cheek and down his back. He could smell the happiness coming off the smaller male in waves and it made Seraphim chirp at him, sharing in his pleasure. Then he was moving forward. His fledgling was right inside, the female waiting for him. She was alone.

The fledgling flung herself forward into his waist. Seraphim raised his wings to keep his balance and growled in irritation. He didn't like his movements hindered, but he did nothing overt to move the female. She smelled excited and happy, but more importantly she smelled healthy. The sense of pain that had hung around her was almost gone. He brought his soon-mate forward with a sweep of his wing. He leaned over so he could take some of the smaller male's head feathers into his mouth to preen them. He was very pleased with him. He had done well with their fledgling.

xXx

Lucius and Knott Sr. slipped away from the circle of Death Eaters who were making a teenage girl do a striptease while her parents acted as human torches lighting the scene. The last had been his idea and he was quite pleased with the effect written plainly in the girl's devastated eyes. Hogsmeade was a wealthy little town. Many families and couples visited the picturesque village for nice weekend dinners. Tourists made prime targets for their games. He regretted not being able to play more, but it was time to move on to his real mission.

They forced the door to Honeyduke's open and strode in, wand at the ready. The candy store was quiet and dark. Lucius grabbed a few pieces of chocolate as he made his way toward the counter and
the trapdoor to the basement.

"Who's there?"

Knott spun and spat out a hex, flinging the man against the wall spread-eagle.

"What the bloody hell!" the man cried, panicked.

"You make candy for a living, so you must love it dearly," Lucius said with mock gentleness.

With a laugh and a swirl of his wand, he sent the candy hurtling toward the owner. It filled his mouth and muffled his screams. Soon he was choking and gagging as more and more candy and chocolates were stuffed down his throat. Lucius smiled.

"Pardon me, good sir. I must excuse myself from this little tea party. I have a school to visit. Come, Theo."

Knott chuckled and cast his own spell, making sure the owner didn't suffocate too quickly, before he followed his partner. They made their way quickly and silently through the supposedly secret passage into Hogwarts. This would get them past the famous wards of Hogwarts. Well, it would get him under them anyway, and even place them inside.

xXx

After cuddling and thoroughly re-placing his scent around his pack members, Seraphim disentangled himself from the warm pile of limbs. The night was slipping away and he needed to hunt to provide for his little pack. He gently pushed the fledgling away from his legs and enjoyed her gurgling sounds of amusement as his feathers tickled her vulnerable hide-less skin. His soon-mate took her arm and Seraphim chirped at him, pleased, before moving toward the door.

He wasn't sure he liked this new nest his pack had seemingly claimed. He could smell the fledgling strong in this room, it obviously belonged to the little female, and he could scent his soon-mate's space from here, not to much deeper in the warren. He could also smell his own scent, though it smelled a little strange, in the space next to the smaller male's. This warren was obviously their new nest, but the scent of two other humans disturbed him. Before he explored and made a decision about whether he'd allow this to become their nest, he wanted to feed his pack.

His soon-mate called after him in that strange way he had and Seraphim obligingly looked over his shoulder to see what the smaller male wanted.

The male garbled something at the fledgling. The female obediently sat and occupied herself with some objects that were covered in her scent while his soon-mate came toward him, his intent obvious. He wanted to hunt with him. Seraphim tilted his head, considering it. It was better for the fledgling if one of them remained with her, but the female was obviously content alone.

Seraphim brushed his wing along his soon-mate's side in acceptance. Hunting was a pleasure he would hate to deny the male, also Seraphim was eager to experience hunting with the Beta of his pack. It would teach him a lot about the smaller male. Excited, he moved toward the door, insisting on being slightly ahead. He was Alpha, after all.

xXx

The Fat Lady was talking to a nearby portrait of a young English woman when she heard footsteps in the hall. It was late, way too late for a child to be wandering around. She puckered her lips in disapproval, ready to scold the miscreant, when she noticed the figure, face concealed by the hood of
their school robe, was stooped in an almost painful way.

"Are you hurt then, dear?"

"Harry Potter," the figure murmured.

The Fat Lady huffed, annoyed that she was being ignored, but opened the door nonetheless at the correct password. She was just about to tell the student off for rudeness when a spell ripped her from her frame so quickly that she didn't even have time to scream.

Carrow flung off her hood and began to chant a Sleeping Charm, sending her magic up and around her. She climbed the stairs steadily before reaching the Fifth-year boys’ dorm. She opened the door, still sending out her magic. Soft snores filled her ears as she checked each bed carefully. She mustn't fail at this point in the game.

The boy's eyes fluttered open despite her gentle charm when she spread his curtains. He let out an uncomfortable moan, his eyes glassy. She smiled and allowed herself to trail her fingers over his soft cheek, down his tender neck. Such beautiful unblemished skin, such strong muscles. She bet his blood would be extra rich. She wondered if it would taste like the forest.

"You," he muttered weakly, eyes opening wide.

"Hush, sweet duckling," Carrow crooned. She raised her wand and enjoyed his gasp of terror. "Stupefy."

xXx

Seraphim stepped off the stairwell that led to their warren and froze. Literally hundreds of scents drifted on the air here. His soon-mate pushed past him so that the stairwell to their warren would close and waited, anxiety drifting off him like smoke. Seraphim sympathized. What were they doing in a place stuffed full of humans? He'd been doubtful but open-minded about the new nest. Now he was certain. It was not a good place. As soon as he hunted and got food for them, he was going to move his pack back to safer grounds.

Seraphim moved forward on all fours, the Black poised and ready to strike out, his wings arched close to his sides. The smaller male moved in his wake on silent feet. Seraphim approved, but he couldn't spare the time or attention to praise him. He had to trust his Beta would be able to keep up and remain silent, like any good predator.

Following the few hints of fresh air, he continued through the dark and silent halls until he reached a large staircase. One side continued upward, the other led down. He sniffed delicately. The smell of fresh air was coming from below them, but as he moved in that direction, he heard scuffling from above and muffled laughter.

Seraphim's head whipped around to stare at his soon-mate as the male stiffened, rage splashing around him and filling the corridor with a sharp scent like lightning. He growled in reaction, his hackles rising as he searched for whatever had made his Beta react so violently. He was shocked when the smaller male darted past him and bolted up the stairs. Snarling, Seraphim ran after him.

They arrived in another dark corridor, but it was not empty. Three humans stood only a few feet away. Two had impassive white faces while a third struggled in the hold of one of the white-faces. Seraphim's wings flapped once in startled reaction. He recognized the scent of the struggling one, but he couldn't quite remember from where. It brought to mind frustration, fear, and the knowledge that the struggling one couldn't be killed without hurting his pack.
His disturbed thoughts were interrupted as his Beta rushed forward, calling out something that had power lashing from him and striking out at the white-faces. The white-face not holding the struggling one responded and called out a similar power, stopping his Beta's attack. Seraphim growled, afraid for his soon-mate, but he was unable to act with his Beta between him and the humans.

He crept forward and fear filled his nose. The white-face battling his Beta was terrified. Seraphim growled happily, pleased his Beta had such an effect on these human men. Surprisingly, the struggling one only smelled of relief and anxiety.

His Beta was calling more power in burst after burst, but the white-face was fueled with a terrible fear that was a match for his soon-mate's rage. The power sizzled and hissed, filling the corridor with static energy, but neither could get the upper hand. Motion drew Seraphim's attention from the vicious battle and he snarled as he watched the second white-face drag the struggling one further down the corridor.

xXx

Adrenaline pumped through Lucius's veins. His traitorous son was practically foaming at the mouth with rage, and that would have delighted him normally but half his attention was on the creature crouching in the darkness behind Draco. As soon as he met those smoldering, insane green eyes, he knew who he was looking at.

Potter had obviously been twisted by Dark magic so badly that he no longer resembled a human. Dark magic pulsed around the thing and the few glimpses of its face were animalistic with sharp teeth. Wings, splattered here and there with fresh blood, flexed and flapped sharply behind it as shadows pooled and slithered around its face and head, concealing it occasionally from view.

Lucius countered his traitorous son's attacks, purely on defense, as he scrambled to think of a plan to get himself out of here and away from that beast! His breathing was harsh in his ears, he knew he was close to hyperventilating. A quick glance behind him showed him the one-eyed witch statue unbearably far away. Knott was dragging their prize backward, obviously just as anxious to get out of there as he was.

The creature that once was Potter snarled, the sound so terrible that Lucius had to fight the urge to scream.

"Keep your pet back or I'll kill the boy!" he yelled, panicked.

Draco laughed. "Scared, Lucius?" he drawled and coldly cast the Whipping Curse. "You should be."

Lucius bared his teeth, sweat dripping down the side of his face and soaking his robes at his back and chest as he countered or blocked his son's unrelenting attacks. He cast wildly in the demon's direction and about vomited when the creature swallowed the spell in a wave of liquid shadow. The green eyes brightened with rage and it lowered itself to the ground, as if preparing to pounce.

Desperate, terrified, Lucius screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

The creature let out a piercing howl as it leapt forward and tackled Draco to the floor. The deadly spell struck the demon in the back, but it was merely swallowed by shadow. Lucius spun and ran for the opening behind the witch. Knott was holding it open, screaming for him to hurry. Lucius dove for passage and kicked out, sending Knott sprawling forward.

The unholy beast was on the fallen man like a nightmare, and Lucius flung himself at the statue,
slapping his shaking hands on the closing mechanism as Knott's screams tore through the night. Finally, the statue moved to block the passage. Blood sprayed inward through the rapidly closing space, splattering across his face and chest, bringing with it the smell of feces as Knott was disemboweled. Even through solid stone, Lucius heard the final, fatal moment when Knott's screams abruptly cut off.

Panting, shaken, Lucius cast a Lumos and stared at the pale teen he'd come to fetch. The boy flinched back at his expression and Lucius felt his face twist into a smile that had nothing to do with happiness or amusement. No longer in the mood to play, he spelled the Gryffindor unconscious. Levitating him, Lucius ran down the passage toward escape.

xXx

Draco knew the Dark spells he and his father had thrown around would attract attention. In fact, he was surprised someone hadn't turned up sooner than this. Shaking from the aftermath of his blinding rage and suffering shock over Seraphim taking a Killing Curse for him, at first he didn't move or say anything as Headmistress McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, and Deputy Headmistress Vector came around the corner.

They froze at the sight of a bloody Seraphim in his fantastic Animagus form crouched over the mutilated corpse of a masked Death Eater. It wasn't until the three adults raised their wands that Draco broke free of his shock and moved forward.

"Lower your wands," he barked, authority ringing in his voice.

The adults obeyed, but they kept them in their hands against their thighs as Seraphim looked up and snarled, exposing his bloody fangs.

"Lucius Malfoy and whoever this is broke into Hogwarts and kidnapped Neville Longbottom. Lucius got away with Longbottom, but we stopped this one."

The Deputy Headmistress quickly cast a spell Draco didn't know and her attention turned to the statue. It moved aside after a moment and she and Flitwick dove into the dark tunnel. Draco knew they were too late. By this point, Lucius would have reached the end of Hogwarts's wards and portkeyed away.

"Is this not the creature who attacked St. Mungo's over Christmas break?" McGonagall asked carefully.

Draco knew McGonagall had been informed that the creature had been Shadow Snape/Harry Potter, but Severus convinced her it was a temporary spell cast by the Dark Lord. How was he going to explain this? Almost desperately, he wished Severus had not abandoned them, even though he knew the man was only doing what he must to protect his son. Gathering his will and resolve, Draco knew he'd have to handle this himself. He wasn't a child to always need his mentor there to guide him.

"It is the same creature," Draco agreed calmly. "The Death Eater there cast a spell that transformed him again. We thought it was a one time occurrence, but obviously the transformation can be re-activated. Now that we know this, preventative measures can be taken."

He came within touching distance of Seraphim and stopped. He recognized the tense shoulders, arched wings, and deceptively still shadow-hair for the warnings that they were. Seraphim was still on edge and moving past him, out from behind his protection, would only drive Seraphim to protect them by removing the threat. It helped that the other two had left and Seraphim no longer felt outnumbered. For now, he was content to snarl warnings and keep his distance from the unknown
"He will not harm you if you don't make any gestures that could be interpreted as threatening," Draco explained, still keeping his voice level and serene. "Please do not come closer. Proximity is considered threatening."

"You are very familiar with his mentality in this state," McGonagall observed.

"The last time he was forced into this transformation, it lasted all night. I was with him the entire time," Draco offered.

McGonagall finally lifted her eyes from the crouched creature and observed Draco. He looked pale and his hands had a faint tremor, but his expression and eyes supported the calm tone to his voice. He was obviously not overly-worried. A battered white wing rose to block her view of the young man. This effectively brought her attention back to the creature she knew to be their only hope. Feral green eyes met hers and an audible growl reached her ears. This actually reassured her. If the creature had enough mind to protect something, then he couldn't be completely consumed by Darkness.

"What should I do?" she asked the Slytherin who was still being kept out of her line of sight.

"If you back away, I'm reasonably sure that he will retreat to a safe place. The closest being the Chamber of Secrets," Draco answered her, relieved that he was being deferred to.

He was further pleased when McGonagall seemed to immediately take his advice and move several feet backward. Seraphim relaxed marginally and edged backward as well, his wing still extended to force Draco backward. Since this was what he wanted, he moved readily. Seraphim didn't turn his back on McGonagall once. In fact, he didn't turn around until they were down the stairs and back on the second floor. Seraphim then turned and hurried back toward the entrance of the Chamber.

It wasn't until Draco was facing the bathroom sinks that he realized they had a problem. They had only made three Parseltongue charms. One for Rogan, Neville, and Sirius. They hadn't made one for Draco because they assumed Shadow would always be there to open the door for him. Thankfully, he didn't have to call down one of the three charm holders. Seraphim merely brushed the sink with his shadow-hair and it swung open into the slide that would drop them into the Chamber.

Draco went first. Seraphim descended much slower, his wings out and slowing his fall. As soon as they reached the bottom, they moved quickly past the dead basilisk that had initially intrigued Seraphim. It wasn't until they were entering the dinning room and Seraphim's stomach rumbled, triggering Draco's own, that he felt a wave incredible self-reproach hit him.

He'd had no idea why Seraphim insisted on leaving the Chamber and had followed him fraught with anxiety, but now he had a good idea as to why the werewolf/dove Animagus had done so. He was hunting for food.

"Omi!" he called and the little elf immediately appeared before him.

Seraphim lashed out in pure reaction, but the nimble elf managed to dodge.

"Send in cold meats, stake, and fruit quickly," Draco ordered.

The elf disappeared without a word just before he was speared on Seraphim's magical hair.

Draco sighed and earned a reproachful look from Seraphim's blazing green eyes. "He won't hurt us," he explained, even knowing that the alter would never believe that.
Seraphim sniffed and moved toward the corridor, obviously intending to go to Marissa, when food appeared on the dinning room table. Seraphim spun around, eyes wide and wings spread with surprise as he took in the feast. He growled and stalked forward, obviously wary, but Draco made soothing sounds and even offered to have some. Seraphim took exception to that and his wing knocked the apple he'd plucked from the table out of his hand. Draco didn't let it bother him. He knew Seraphim was just trying to protect him.

The alter sniffed at the food, made a few circuits of the table, before deciding to try some of the offering. Of course, he went for the practically raw steak. After a few bites and no ill reaction, he growled again and moved quickly toward the corridor. He barked twice, obviously calling Marissa. Draco was about to call her with words, but it wasn't necessary. She obviously understood the alter and came running into the room with a happy smile.

Seraphim brushed her with his wing and nuzzled her cheek briefly before pushing her toward the table.

Draco sat with her and they both snacked. Neither one of them was really hungry. They had dinner not too long ago, but Seraphim was obviously very determined.

The alter ate with surprising speed. He consumed a startling amount before finally sighing and stepping away from the table. He chirped, calling them toward him.

Draco eyed the alter, suspicious, but Marissa ran to him without hesitation. One white wing curled around her, pulling her against his body and hiding her from view. Draco moved up to the alter. He was subjected to the same treatment, with an additional quick lick along his jaw. Startled by the gesture, Draco didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. Shadows were summoned from the corners of the room and converged around them. Darkness swamped his vision and then he was no longer at Hogwarts.

"Merlin," he grumbled as he was released back into reality. He stumbled and looked wildly around the dark room where he found himself. It only took a moment to recognize it. "The abandoned Muggle house."

"We're home," came Marissa's rather surprising statement.

He turned to the little girl. "Hogwarts is our home."

She thought about that. "Maybe, but this is our first home. We're safe here. Angel likes it, can't you tell?" She smiled up at Draco and took his hand with a yawn. "I bet our blankets are still here. Come on."

Draco only then realized they were alone in the room. Seraphim had slipped off somewhere. Sheer panic hit his system. Before he could even move to look for the wayward alter, Seraphim appeared in the doorway, hackles raised. When he sniffed and saw no threat, he chirped questioningly. Draco flushed, feeling stupid for a second time.

Seraphim tilted his head at him. He must have come to some sort of conclusion because he stepped forward and ran a wing along his cheek before wrapping the wing around his shoulders to pull him into Seraphim's side. Marissa giggled and slipped past them to go look for the blankets.

His attention was brought back to his friend when Seraphim began cooing at him soothingly, his taloned hands brushing against his chest and neck as Seraphim mouthed at his hair. Feeling both uncomfortable and grateful for the obvious affection and care, Draco remained still, his heart beginning to beat faster. So much had happened within a short span of time and it was beginning to
catch up with him. Neville was kidnapped, he had dueled Lucius, he'd ordered the Headmistress about, and they had somehow by-passed the wards of Hogwarts with Seraphim’s strange shadow-travel; Draco shut his eyes and tried to calm his jangled nerves.

They flew open again as Seraphim cooed against his throat, inhaling his scent in a deep breath. The alter's hands snuck up his shirt to caress his skin and the sharp talons made goosebumps break out on his arms as they scratched lightly over his nipples and down his chest. Heat began to pool in his stomach and he groaned in annoyance. Now wasn't the time for hormones, not to mention the fact that he didn't want to give Seraphim ideas and get Shadow mad at him.

The shadow-hair slid between them and snaked under Draco's clothes, molding itself to Draco's chest, sides, and thighs. He gasped, arching, as the Black magic seemed to bypass his skin and caress his nerves directly, sending sparks of pleasure flashing through his mind and body like summer lightning. It called to his every primal and sensual instinct and was impossible to resist.

A deep coo was Seraphim’s response as he licked leisurely over Draco’s jaw, leaving a trail of spicy, hot saliva. Draco shuddered, completely passive in his arms. He couldn't stop his reactions, his mind blurring with a haze of lust, but he could refrain from instigating anything between them.

He was incredibly aroused, his skin twitching. His breath hitched in his throat as he was stimulated by magic and physical touch. He heard cloth rip and the faint scratch of sharp talons along his back. The cool night air caressed his skin, making him hypersensitive to the Black magic that oozed and teased, slowly setting him burning with need.

Sweat dripped tantalizingly down his neck, following the path of a long, rough tongue, making the echo of the lick linger. Draco moaned as that tongue dipped lower and lapped at his collar bone. Incredibly soft feathers caressed his back in teasing little brushes. Then the Black magic shredded his pants and the feathers began to tickle the back of his thighs as well.

Draco was a panting mess by this point. He leaned forward to keep from collapsing and cried out when his revealed erection brushed against Seraphim's muscled thigh. A low growl resonated through Seraphim's chest into Draco's, and it had him gasping and squirming, every inch of his skin alive.

Seraphim's hands grasped his hips and held him still as the alter ground their erections together. Draco screamed, his legs giving out as the Black magic helped make them slick. Seraphim fell with him, landing on top with an excited growl. The talon's broke his skin, the sharp pain only making things spiral higher. The blood obviously affected Seraphim, as the Black dove forward and practically blanked him in one long caress that had him arching and screaming breathlessly, eyes blind to everything except the fireworks.

Draco lost all semblance of control and thrusted wildly upward, desperate for release. He felt teeth at his shoulder, heard large wings beating at the air, sounding for all the world like his own rapid heartbeat. Draco thrashed under his lover as he felt the Black shock his nerves with pleasure again and again, until he was screaming and crying and begging. Seraphim arched back with a howl that shook the windows as they both orgasmed simultaneously.

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Seraphim collapsed on his unconscious mate, panting harshly, his mouth wide open and his wings flapping idly to both cool him and to burn off excess energy. The sharp scent of mating dulled his senses pleasantly. Content for the first time, he cooed and lay limp and sated next to his Beta.

The smaller male had proven himself to be a capable hunter as well as a good leader for their
fledgling who had obviously flourished under his care. The scent of his distress when they had arrived at their nest had him feeling very protective. He'd known then that he was ready to mate for life with this incredible male.

Not only had the Beta stalked on silent feet and held his own against the hated white-face, Seraphim was aware that he had managed to extract them from the other humans who'd happened upon them after his kill. The smaller male had two off running in moments and the older female backing away shortly after. Seraphim didn't think he would have been able to manage the same without more death.

Filled with pride fit to bursting, he'd been further impressed when the smaller male had managed to procure them food. He was still not certain how that had been done, but all that mattered was that his mate had provided for them. Now he felt content and lazy, pleased with their fully successful mating. The Beta would forever be marked as Seraphim's; none would dare touch him now. Growling in pleasure, he arched, sliding his still sensitive skin against his naked mate.

A few minutes passed before he noticed the faint tremors running through the smaller male. He sniffed and realized the temperature in the room was rather chill. His feathers ruffled in annoyance. He didn't want to move so soon, but taking care of his mate took precedent over his desires.

Standing, he gently lifted the smaller male into his arms and carried him toward the back of the nest. There amid a pile of blankets and other soft material, their fledgling snuggled and slept. Seraphim gently lay his mate down next to her and covered him with the cloths. The female woke enough to murmur at him and he cooed softly, his wing brushing over her in reassurance.

The fledgling smiled and settled down into slumber again. Practically vibrating with satisfaction, he curled around his mate, leaving a wing draped over the fledgling to keep her warm. He preened his mate's head fathers for a moment before falling gently into sleep.

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Monday morning dawned bright and cold. Dazed survivors wandered Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, searching and crying for lost loved ones. Aurors and Healers helped look for bodies and tended to those too much in shock to realize they were wounded. Every able hand helped clear away debris. Death tallies and lists of the missing were made.

McGonagall walked back toward Hogwarts from the village with a heavy heart. The Death Eaters had planned well by making two attacks at once, splitting the Aurors and Order members' attention. The portrait of the Fat Lady would never be mended, the personality stored there forever lost, and one of her lion cubs, Neville Longbottom, had been abducted.

Worse, she had allowed the Death Eaters to strike at their one hope, Harry Potter, or as he was now known, Shadow Snape. They had tried again to turn him into an instrument of destruction, but hopefully they had failed a second time. She had expected Severus to appear in the night and berate her for incompetence. She had to wonder if he was another unknown casualty of last night's devastation.

Exhausted, she entered her office and sat tiredly behind her desk. Not a moment later Umbridge came up the stairs. McGonagall studied her pale features with silent delight. The woman had seen with her own eyes the destructive nature of the Death Eaters. Hopefully this would make her see that this war was not a time to struggle over popularity or power, this was a battle for survival.

"The remains of the man attacked by Hogwarts's wards has been identified as Theodore Knott Sr.," Umbridge reported without her usual venom. "Will you notify his son?"
"I will," McGonagall answered. It would not be easy, but she would have no other deliver this sad news to one of her charges.

"Do you have any idea why Longbottom would be taken while leaving the rest of the children and school untouched?" Umbridge looked very confused about this. Longbottom had been unremarkable in many of his classes.

"No. I find the logic of Death Eaters fluid at best."

Umbridge said nothing to this. Her blue eyes were bright with some unnamed emotion. McGonagall waited for her to say something more, but the woman merely turned and left.

Sighing, McGonagall took off her half-moon glasses and rubbed at her eyes. She was so tired, but instead of resting, she moved to her fireplace and called Carrow's private chambers. "Please send Mr. Knott and Mr. Montgomery up to my office," she ordered and broke the connection. Her distaste for the vile woman was at an all time high, but she couldn't prove her suspicions that Carrow had something to do with the break in last night.

Next she contacted Flitwick. "Please send Miss Fortecue to my office as soon as possible."

She moved back to her desk and poured herself some tea. Usually she drank it black, but this morning she dropped two sugar cubes into the steaming liquid. Sipping it carefully, she jotted down notes to remind her to have all the secret passages examined and the wards strengthened around the school. She had assumed there was no way around their defenses and had been terribly wrong. She wasn't about to let that happen again.

"You asked to see me?"

McGonagall looked up in surprise. She'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't noticed the slight, Third-year girl come up the staircase. "Ah, Miss Fortecue, thank you for coming." Standing, McGonagall gestured at the seat across from her.

The girl took it nervously, her round hazel eyes wide with fear. She knew something was wrong to be summoned to the Headmistress's office before breakfast.

"I'm afraid I have bad news. Death Eaters attacked Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade last night," she said gently.

"No," the girl said faintly. "My Uncle?"

"I'm afraid Florian Fortecue was killed and his shop destroyed. Your mother has requested you come home. Pack a few things and return after breakfast. I will open the floo network to outside channels then."

The thirteen-year-old nodded, tears falling down her pale face. She rose without saying a word and practically fled.

Mr. Knott and Mr. Montgomery arrived not five minutes after Miss Fortecue left. McGonagall's headache had reached unbearable levels by this point and she discreetly poured a headache potion into her tea. The two teenage boys stared at her with remarkably blank faces, but their eyes were not all that different than Miss Fortecue's had been.

"Mr. Knott, would you mind waiting a moment while I speak to Mr. Montgomery?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Theodore Knott responded evenly, his dark eyes resigned as he slipped from
McGonagall studied the Second-year before her. He had thick black hair, messy from being woken early, dark olive skin, and hazel-blue eyes that regarded her very intently. She gestured to the seat. He refused, shaking his head once.

McGonagall sighed and folded her hands on her desk. "I'm very sorry to tell you this, but there was a Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade last night."

The young boy's face paled, but he maintained his Slytherin mask.

"Your mother and brother were shopping. Mrs. Montgomery died. Christopher, your brother, was attacked by Fenrir Greyback. He is in critical condition at St. Mungo's. Should he live, he will suffer from lycanthropy."

The boy staggered, but quickly got himself under control. "My father…"

"He is well and waiting for you at St. Mungo's. Pack a few things and return after breakfast. I will have the floo connected to the outside network by then."

Montgomery nodded and left the room, swaying slightly, but he never once showed his distress on his face.

McGonagall sighed. She would never understand this obsession drilled into Slytherins to keep their emotions (except anger or disdain) locked away. She had no time to contemplate this. Knott had arrived and, by the stiffness of his posture, she knew he already suspected what news she had to deliver. He'd seen Montgomery's non-expression on the way out.

"Please, have a seat."

Knott shook his head the same as his younger classmate had before him.

"Mr. Knott, there was a Death Eater raid last night on Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Your father was killed in battle, dressed in full Death Eater regalia. Should you wish to return home, pack a bag and return here after breakfast. I will connect the floo to the outside network by that time."

Knott lowered his head briefly, his fists clenching at his sides. However, when he lifted his head again, McGonagall could discern no emotion in his expression. "I am saddened by this news, but I feel returning home right now would not be the best thing for me or my family. I request that I be allowed to stay unless specifically requested by my family to return."

"That is your decision," McGonagall answered. She didn't know if this was a good thing or not. Was Knott afraid to go home and be pressured to take up his father's position in Voldemort's ranks, or was he involved in some dark scheme that he felt would revenge his father's death?

Knott bowed his head and said, "Headmistress." Then he turned and left her office with a steady gait.

McGonagall settled back in her chair with a tired sigh. She wondered how many more of these conversations she'd have as more names appeared on the death tallies. She hoped not many. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to rest. Just for a few minutes.

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Shadow blinked his eyes and shivered. It was cold. Looking out the window, he saw sleet falling.
Then his eyes widened. There were no windows in the Chamber. He looked around wildly, ignoring the sharp pains from pulled muscles. He recognized the place in moments. Confused but no longer frightened, he stood. The cold made him shiver and he quickly picked up one of the blankets balled on the floor to wrap around his nakedness.

"Draco?" he called hesitantly.

"You're awake," the blond answered as he walked into the room. He had on Muggle clothes that were too big for him and it looked like he had more of the same in his hands.

"What happened? What day is it?" he demanded, taking the clothes and pulling them on quickly. He glanced up to see his friend shifting his weight uncomfortably. Shadow paled. "Tell me."

"First, Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were attacked last night," Draco told him carefully.

Shadow took that in and tried to keep calm. "How bad?"

"Bad." Draco moved further into the room and took Shadow's hand. "There's more. Two Death Eaters, my father included, used the attack on Hogsmeade to slip into the school unnoticed. They took Neville."

Shadow had to lock his knees as they threatened to give out on him. He stared at his lover in horror. Suddenly he remembered the battle at the Department of Mysteries. The Death Eaters had seen Neville's abilities there and Neville had been complaining of being stalked since returning from Christmas break. Why hadn't he done something about it?

"Tell me the rest," he croaked, only now becoming aware that Draco had wrapped his arms around him.

Draco recounted the details in a short and concise manner. When he worked his way up to when they arrived here, Draco had wildly conflicting emotions. He really wanted to keep from Shadow the way things had unraveled between him and Seraphim, but he knew keeping it from Shadow would be an even worse betrayal.

He carefully released Shadow from his arms and held his shoulders. "Seraphim marked me again," he said delicately. "As his mate."

Shadow's face was already deathly pale, but at this two spots of color rose in his cheeks. "What happened this morning?" he asked. He wasn't ready to hear about what Draco had done with Seraphim.

Draco was desperately glad that he didn't have to give any more detail than that. He quickly moved on. "After the transformation, you were out of it, so I went to get us some clothes. That's when I saw the Emergency Bulletin. They're posted on every main street corner throughout Britain, but only those with magical abilities can read them. I knocked out two Muggles and stole their clothes before returning here. Marissa is in the kitchen eating breakfast."

"First Severus and now Neville," Shadow said faintly. "They're both gone."

"Severus is fine," Draco countered firmly. "And we're going to help Neville."

Shadow nodded, his head spinning. He didn't even want to imagine what his brother was going through at the hands of the Death Eaters. Guilt threatened to swallow him whole.

"Come on. You could use some food, too," Draco said gently and guided his friend toward the
kitchen.

Marissa smiled as they entered. "Morning, Shadow. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Thanks," the teen answered absently.

The little girl frowned at that, but Draco made a face at her telling her how much he needed her to be nice, so she straightened and pretended she wasn't angry with Shadow.

Draco smiled thankfully at her and put a sandwich and an individual carton of milk on the table. The curly-haired teen didn't move to take them. "Hey, eat up so we can get going. We have to get back to Hogwarts."

"Where would they hold him?" Shadow asked.

"I don't know." Draco rubbed his hands together uneasily. "We know the Dark Lord was making Snape Manor his home base, but we don't know if he still is or if they would keep Neville there. They might take him to a lesser base in case someone tracks him."

Shadow's hands tightened around the table edge. "We have to find him, Draco."

"We will," he promised. "Hurry and eat and we'll go."

"I'm not hungry," Shadow protested and moved to stand. "Let's go now."

"No." Draco met his friend's eyes, steel hard determination clear in his expression. "You just went through a very draining transformation and had a very bad shock. You need to eat. We have several Apparation jumps to make to get back to Hogwarts. I don't want you fainting halfway there."

Shadow sighed, knowing Draco was right, but the thought of food made him want to vomit. Taking a deep breath, he tried to force his slowly escalating emotions under tight control. He could feel furious, terrified, guilty, and desperate later. Right now he had to eat and get back to Hogwarts so that they could come up with a plan. Neville needed him to be strong.

Resolute, he began to eat, very carefully thinking about nothing.

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"I don't see what choice we have," Shadow said calmly.

They were in the Potions study back at the Chamber. Marissa was in her room napping. She hadn't slept very much the night before with Seraphim keeping her up. Draco wished she were awake and bothering them. That way Shadow wouldn't have the concentration to focus on this ridiculous plan.

"We don't have the resources to discover Neville's location by ourselves."

"I can go and come back to keep you updated," Draco responded, trying very hard to match Shadow's calm, collected tone. He knew if he started yelling, he'd automatically lose this debate. "I hardly think placing yourself under their power without your legal guardian around is a very wise move. We don't have Severus around to shield you."

Shadow crossed his arms, the magical jacket rustling with the gesture. As soon as they had gotten back, Shadow had put it on. He stared at Draco, his face pale and unreadable. "I'm hardly helpless."

"Neither are they," he retorted, eyes narrowing.
"Exactly why I wish to use them."

Draco's lip curled in disgust. He knew how impossible it was to influence his love when he'd decided on something, but he was going to try because, damn it, this wasn't a good idea. "What about Marissa? Are we just going to bring her with us into the Order's headquarters? It's not exactly the place for a child."

"She can stay here with Sirius. He's still playing Remus, but you can sneak her up to Remus's quarters under the invisibility cloak while I take the potion."

"I'm not letting you take that potion unsupervised!" Draco shouted, finally breaking.

"I'll be fine. You know that." Shadow shook his head and moved toward the door, the potion clasped in his hand. "I don't need you to watch."

"You're determined to suffer alone, aren't you," Draco snarled at his back.

Shadow turned around to face him. His expression softened. "I'm not trying to do this without you, but it has to be done. The world needs Harry Potter after the attacks. We need to give the people hope. As an added bonus, I'll be on the scene to hear any news concerning Neville. I'll be able to make sure the Order is properly focused on searching for him. I want him to be their priority and I can't do that from here."

Draco scowled. "It's too risky."

"We're at war, Serpentine. You know that," Shadow said softly. "There are going to be times when risks must be taken."

"I hate it when you're right," he mumbled, and then more loudly he added, "When are you going to talk to me about what happened with Seraphim? I can tell it's still bothering you."

Shadow stiffened, his eyes turning cold. "Now's not the time."

"I hardly think talking about it with the Order hanging around would be better." Draco crossed the distance between them, but he stopped short when Shadow actually stepped back. "Shadow…"

"I can't…" The teen clenched his shaking hands as his calm control cracked to reveal the truth underneath. "I can't talk about this right now."

"Shadow, it not like with you," Draco pressed, desperate to get through this. "The Black magic just took over and…"

Shadow's hand lashed out in a violent gesture. "Stop! Please, Draco, just stop." He took several deep breaths. "I trust you, Draco, and you know how much this bothers me, so I'm sure you didn't mean to start anything, that Seraphim had to have instigated it. I definitely don't want to know details of what exactly you did together, and I don't want to know what it felt like. I don't want to think about it. And, yeah, I know I'm running away from it and that's not going to make the problem go away. But that's just it. The problem won't go away no matter what I do. I'm stuck with Seraphim. There's no getting rid of the bloody bastard. So I'm going to ignore it and try not to let it ruin even more of my life. So don't bring it up. Don't make me talk about it. Okay? Are we clear now?"

Draco stood still, shocked at Shadow's outburst. He felt unbearably sad that his love felt so trapped and hopeless, and he was upset that he was adding to Shadow's unhappiness. He didn't say anything further as the teen spun on his heel and marched out of the room.
Closing his eyes, Draco tried to get himself together. He didn't think he'd have any trouble convincing Marissa to stay. She was rather unhappy with Shadow at the moment. She'd asked earlier if Shadow had made the angel go away. Draco had tried to explain that it wasn't like that, but he didn't think he'd convinced her.

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Neville opened his eyes slowly, afraid any sudden movement would crack his skull in half. He breathed deeply, evenly, through the pain. White hot heat shot down his neck and down his arms. He felt disorientated and dizzy. Throwing up wasn't a good idea, though, so he concentrated on his stomach until its summersaults slowed into gentle rolls that were almost more disturbing, but at least he wasn't on the verge of sicking-up.

This time when he opened his eyes a sliver, he was actually able to take in a slice of where he was. Glass. A strange glass wall was in front of him. Curious, he slid his eyes open even further, waiting for added pain. He winced as the light seemed to sear straight into the back of his head, but he managed to make out that the strange glistening glass made up all four walls, the floor, and ceiling.

Where was he? What happened? Weak and hot, he tried to turn over and realized with a start that he was already standing. Gasping, Neville looked around wildly, fighting to think past his body's complaints. He was standing. His arms were outstretched at shoulder-height and cuffed to the wall with glass manacles. A band half a foot thick held his chest flat and immobile. More manacles held his ankles against the wall. He was still wearing his school clothes: a white, long-sleeved button-down, his Gryffindor tie, school slacks, socks and shoes.

"Wha-" his voice emerged, hoarse and slurred. His vision went swirling once again and he quickly shut his eyes before his nausea could return full force.

Very carefully, Neville worked through his memories. He remembered brushing Ginny's hair by the fire after dinner. They talked softly of their classes, Carrow's terribly difficult Potions test, and the DA. She stood, kissed his cheek, and went up to bed. Then what?

After that his memories were a bit vague. Sitting on his bed… reading a book? Suddenly feeling sleepy… Then… Carrow's grin? Maybe he dreamed that, though. He did remember being dumped down some stairs. He remembered the sickening falling sensation, the pain when his head cracked against stone… Then fuzzy blackness… The next thing he remembered were hands, a dog growling, green eyes, and Lucius Malfoy pointing his wand at him with the most insane look.

Neville bit his lip, trying to swallow his rising fear. He'd been captured. He wished he could just tell himself it had all been a bad dream, but this glass cell told him differently. He wasn't at Hogwarts. He wasn't with sane, civilized people. Death Eaters had him, and the only reason he could think that they had captured him, was that they knew of his power and were either going to try and steal it or somehow make him use it for them.

Crying out, he thrashed against his unyielding bindings, utterly panicked. His head pounded and his body violently protested, but he was mindless with the fear. His stomach heaved and vomit splattered the floor and his shirt before he passed out once again.

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Shadow came to slowly, his legs spasming with deep charlie-horses. Crying softly, Shadow stretched his calves by bending and straightening his knee even though this made agony shoot up his leg. He was so lost in the pain that he didn't even notice when his door opened and Draco slipped into the room. He didn't notice Draco at all until the blond lifted his leg and gently massaged at the muscle.
Shadow gasped and twisted, the sensation almost unbearable as tears streaked down his face.

"I think all these forced, whole body transformations are starting to take a toll," Draco said softly, his nimble fingers working out all the knots.

"Maybe," Shadow gasped, stars still going off behind his eyes. He grit his teeth and tried not to scream.

Draco didn't say anything else and slowly his fingers worked away the pain until Shadow was left limp and trembling. He felt a hand gently brush his wild hair off his forehead. The gesture made a lump rise in Shadow’s throat. He wanted to just tug Draco down and lie there, just for a moment, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't reach out.

"We have to do something about your scar," Draco murmured.

Shadow opened his eyes, grateful to ignore the conflicted feelings revolving around the other Slytherin. "Maybe a glamour."

"That could be detected," Draco pointed out. It was strange to look into two green eyes and not be talking to Seraphim. Although, they weren't the exact same color as the alter's. Harry Potter's green eyes were lime green while Seraphim's eyes were tinted Killing Curse green, which was a bit richer and darker.

"We could just leave it off and explain that my connection with Voldemort is broken."

"Or we could use a Dark glamour," Draco said slowly, thoughtfully. "That way if anyone notices magic in that area, they'll just think it's the scar."

"Good idea." Shadow sat up and had to grip Draco's shoulder as a dizzy spell washed through him.

"Are you okay?" Draco frowned, his eyes going dark with worry. "Should I get someone?"

He shook his head. "Where's Marissa? What time is it?"

"Marissa is up with Sirius. It's about seven at night. You were unconscious for four hours."

"We should head for Grimmauld Place," Shadow said anxiously. He pushed his legs over the corner of the bed and leaned into Draco to as he stood. "Neville might not have much more time."

Draco wisely said nothing. He knew if he argued or tried to slow Shadow down, his love would merely stop letting him help. At least this way Draco would be there if he collapsed. It took two an hour to get Shadow dressed and another hour to correctly spell the Dark glamour of a lightning bolt scar onto his head. The corrective glasses Remus had ordered arrived that morning. Draco handed them over last.

"How do I look?" Shadow lifted his arms away from his sides to show off his attire.

The robe was too long over both his feet and hands as Shadow Snape's body was two inches taller than Harry Potter's. What mattered, though, was the Gryffindor tie and crest on his chest. It was hard to think of his love as Shadow when his face was Harry Potter's again, but maybe that was for the best. It would ensure Draco wouldn't slip and call him Shadow at the wrong time.

"Like you belong to the lions," Draco admitted.

Harry flashed a grin very reminiscent of Gabriel and pushed his round, black glasses higher up his
nose. "Well, then, lets get going."

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Charlie looked up from the maps he was bent over. His frustration with all the interruptions evaporated like smoke, however, when he saw a small teenager standing in the doorway with Sturgis Podmore standing behind him, his face shining with both excitement and awe. Only the Triad knew of Harry's existence as Shadow Snape, so the rest of the Order and the Wizarding World still thought Harry was dead or missing since that summer.

The green-eyed Gryffindor smiled slightly, adverting his eyes as his fingers played with his too-long sleeves. "Charlie," he greeted softly.

"Harry, come in." Charlie quickly gestured to one of the chairs. "Thank you, Podmore. Shut the door, please."

Podmore nodded dumbly and did as his leader requested, his eyes never leaving the form of the first bit of hope he'd had in a long time.

"The door is warded. Our conversation will be private," Charlie informed the teen.

The green eyes came up again. This time there was no shy uncertainty; they met his stare in a calm look that Charlie associated with Slytherins. "That's good to know. Do you know where I've been?"

Charlie nodded. "When the twins told me what happened at the Ministry over Christmas, it was obvious you had gotten yourself adopted. I informed the rest of the Triad, but we agreed that for your protection and to avoid Ministry questions involving what happened with the veil we decided to keep your new identity secret. The Ministry is very eager to get a hold of Shadow to answer questions regarding what happened to you down there. They also suspect you were the Dark creature that attacked St. Mungo's with Draco Malfoy. It wouldn't help if Harry Potter was associated with either of those incidents."

"I agree. Thank you for keeping what you know relatively secret." Harry pulled at his hair that was so much different than the curls he'd grown use to. "I'm guessing you wouldn't mind answers yourself."

"Answers would be nice, Harry," Charlie said gently, his eyes brightening with humor. Harry nodded, but didn't speak right away. Charlie figured he'd help him ease into explanations by asking questions. "Where's Malfoy?"

"Black, actually. He's not a Malfoy anymore. And he's here." Harry waved in the general direction of the rest of the house. "He's the one who brought me. We told Podmore, who was guarding the entrance, that Draco found me walking up to Hogwarts and advised me to come here instead."

Charlie nodded. "And the truth?"

"I think that people need to see me around again after the two attacks."

"Uh huh," he shook his head, disbelieving. "So you're forsaking the cover you cherish just to reassure the public?"

Harry smiled wryly. "Well, no. I need your help to rescue Neville."

"I see." Charlie crossed his arms and regarded the teenager solemnly. "Are you going to tell me the truth now regarding the creature you turned into and your confusion as to your identity in the
Department of Mysteries? I would also like to know about the extreme power you displayed."

"You don't want much," Harry said sarcastically with a grimace.

"And do you know where your father's gone? His absence is most disturbing," Charlie admitted. "Not to mention it's worrying Minerva terribly."

"Tell her to join the club. I don't know where he is. All I know is that Voldemort was invading his mind through the Dark Mark. He had to isolate himself to prevent himself from thinking about things Voldemort can't know."

"That is not good news," Charlie murmured gravely. Severus knew plenty. If Voldemort caught wind even of a fraction of Severus's knowledge the Order and Harry both would be at a severe disadvantage.

"Severus will protect us," Harry snapped with a glare. "He knows what he's doing."

The redhead nodded, accepting that for now. "And the answers to my other questions?"

"I have a variant of a werewolf in my head. It comes out at the full moon and other times of stress. Suffice it to say Draco, Severus, and I have done everything we can to keep the creature tame and relatively harmless. We're working on a cure."

"What kind of variant?" Charlie pressed.

"Wings and what not. I'm sure you know. I don't seem to have the bloodlust or mindlessness of a real werewolf, but I will resort to violence if provoked. I don't remember anything that happens when I transform. The transformation is complete on the full moon, meaning I change physically, but during times of stress just the mentality switches. As for the power Shacklebolt witnessed, the beast gives me access to the more primal magics."

"And this was done to you?"

"What I wrote in my letter months ago, which I'm sure you've read, wasn't all a lie." Harry sat straighter and his expression became even more unreadable. "I was tortured nearly to death in the graveyard after the Triwizard Tournament. We can only speculate that the resulting condition I suffer is due to the combination of so many dark spells or a spell gone awry."

Charlie winced. "What is your cover story while you're here?"

"The same as the one I've already told you. I've been recovering in China, but now I feel able to fight once again. I was transported just outside of Hogwarts's wards and Draco found me before I reached the school, bringing me here."

"That will work." Charlie rubbed at his eyes. "How long will you stay?"

"As long as it's necessary, but the first thing that needs to be done is Neville's rescue." Harry leaned forward and studied the maps on the table. "What have you found so far?"

"Not much. The Death Eaters have gone to ground again after the attacks." Charlie palmed his wand and sent certain maps into the air to float before their eyes. "These are the areas most likely to hold Death Eater hideouts. We've scouted as best we could, but we can find no definite proof that Neville is being held at any of them."

"Have the scouts also been observing the landscape?" Harry asked, eyes roving over the seven
locations presented to him.

Charlie glanced at him curiously. "For what?"

"Neville is an Earth Elemental. I'm not sure you're aware of just how deep and unconscious that connection is. If Neville's being hurt or mistreated, the land should reflect that. They need to look for suddenly dying plants or other vegetative abnormalities," Harry explained. "I know that this is going to be difficult because it's the middle of February and winter is still affecting plant life, but it could help us figure out where he's being kept."

"I will tell my agents to keep their eyes open."

"Thank you." Harry bowed his head briefly.

"Are you ready to be introduced to the Order? I'll issue a call for a full meeting for tomorrow afternoon."

"That's fine." Harry did want to reassure everyone with his presence. They might as well get as much as they could out of Harry Potter's reemergence as they could. He didn't plan on returning to this appearance very frequently and, in fact, planned to kill Harry Potter off permanently as soon as the war was over.

Harry stood and followed Charlie upstairs. The redhead was merely making sure no one bothered him as he retreated to his bedroom. Harry opened his door and froze upon seeing Draco sitting on one of the two twin beds inside. The blond looked up with a neutral expression.

"You don't mind rooming with him, do you? We are tight for space."

Harry shook his head. "No. It's fine." He moved the rest of the way in and nodded once to let Charlie know he was okay.

Charlie glanced at the blond curiously before shutting the door behind him, leaving them alone. Draco’s expression softened as soon as they didn't have an audience. He knew he couldn't be seen as too close to the Boy-Who-Lived. It wouldn't make sense when Harry and he had been enemies for most of their school career, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let the façade remain when they were alone.

"What's the matter? You seem uncomfortable."

Harry didn't answer right away, instead he sat at the small desk in one corner and pulled out some parchment and a quill. "I'm fine."

"Shadow…"

"Don't call me that!" Harry hissed, his green eyes narrowed.

"I put up Privacy Wards," Draco protested.

"Still…" Harry turned back to his letter.

Draco sighed, his chest constricting. "So that's it then. You hate me. You'll tolerate me, but that's about it."

"Stop being so melodramatic."
"You won't even look at me!"

Harry reluctantly turned to face his friend. "I don't hate you, okay?"

"Oh, that's perfectly clear. What was I thinking?"

He scowled. "Stop. You're not helping!"

"You won't let me help." Draco stood and strode toward the door. "I'll just get our of your way."

The door slammed and Harry sighed, guilt eating at his stomach. He wasn't being fair, he knew that, but he couldn't help it. The fact that Draco was so close to Seraphim bothered the hell out of him. He didn't like that Draco was with someone else. It didn't matter that that someone else used Harry's own body. He didn't know how to cope with the situation, so he was avoiding it. Besides, Neville was more important right now.

He turned back to the letter addressed to Ron and Hermione. He wanted to explain why he and Draco wouldn't be coming to the DA anymore and also ask her to explain to Rogan. Of course, he couldn't say any of this plainly, in case Umbridge or someone else intercepted the letter, but he was confident that Hermione would be able to read between the lines.

Chapter end.
Confrontations

Shadow surveyed the beautiful house. He was home. Best of all, he knew the wards around them kept anyone from finding them. He smiled as he walked through the front door. Delicious smells pulled him toward the kitchen. Looking in, he watched Draco make a large dinner with Severus. Laughter sounded from across the hallway. Looking around the corner into the sitting room, Shadow smiled as he watched Marissa and Neville play with marbles. Both of them looked up with a grin and waved.

Shadow was content. He had everything he needed. Those he loved, a companion, and a guardian. They were safe and nothing could ever hurt them here. There was nothing else that he needed or wanted. Right here within these walls was everything that made life worth living and he was going to keep them all safe.

As if reading his thoughts, Neville stood up. Shadow frowned when he noticed blood dripping off his fingers. Shadow moved forward warily. Marissa screamed as Neville began to shine with dark green malevolent light. Shadow leapt forward, trying to grab the girl to get her clear, but the light flared and blinded him. When he landed, he was no longer at the house. He was no longer safe. Panting, fear bubbling up his spine, making him shake, he crept carefully forward.

Cresting a small hill, he gasped and fell to his knees. Neville was pinned to the ground, large wooden spikes through his wrist and ankles were pinning him down. Several dark-robed, white-masked figures were circling him, casting spells every few seconds. Neville arched and writhed against the wooden stakes, the sounds he was making made him remember all the agony he’d suffered…

"…please, wake up. It's just a dream. No one's going to hurt you. You're alright."

Shadow sat bolt upright, gasping and sobbing. Without thinking about it, he flung himself at Draco and clung to him, hiding his face against his broad shoulder. He almost whimpered in relief when Draco's arms curled around him and pulled him snuggly against his chest. They rocked slowly as Shadow's heart calmed and the nausea and terror began to fade.

"Shhh, you're okay. No one's going to hurt you. You're safe," Draco was murmuring in his ear.

Shadow's fingers tightened in Draco's silk pajama shirt. "Nev… He was in the graveyard," he croaked, his teeth beginning to chatter as he descended into shock. "They were circling him… Pined him down with wooden stakes, impaling him… He was sc-screaming…"

Draco shuddered, remembering what he'd witnessed from his father's Pensieve. It wasn't Neville he was visualizing, though. It was Shadow; it was always Shadow. The fact that his lover now looked like Harry didn't help, since that was the face he'd had then.

"It was just a dream," he said softly, reassuring them both. "Neville is not at the graveyard. They want him healthy to use him. We're going to rescue him and he'll be good as new in no time."

He shifted Shadow to one arm and reached for his wand. He conjured a bowl of water and summoned a wash cloth. Very carefully he dipped the cloth in the water and wiped at the cold-sweat and tears marring Shadow's face. He smiled as his love slowly relaxed, his eyes fluttering closed as he rested his head in the crook of Draco's neck.
Harry was four inches shorter than him, so they fit rather well together like this, not that he preferred it. He really missed Shadow's lankier form, his compelling two-colored eyes, and carefree curls. Besides, Shadow seemed so much more comfortable and natural in that form than this one. Being Harry Potter required him to act more Gryffindorish and that definitely was not a turn-on for Draco.

"What time is it?" Harry asked, cracking his eyes open.

"Almost seven in the morning," Draco answered after casting the Tempus Charm. "Want me to go get us some breakfast?"

Harry didn't say anything for a minute. "No. Not yet."

Draco smiled and shifted a bit to put his back to the headboard. He got comfortable and pulled Harry back up against him. "That's fine with me."

"Thank you. I know you're mad at me…"

"I'm not mad at you. I'm frustrated and confused. I love you. It's exasperating not being able to help you, and it's absolutely maddening to be part of the problem. I never want to hurt you."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes again, willing the imagery of Neville's suffering out of his mind. After seeing that horrific scene, the image before it, of being home and safe with everyone he truly cared about with him out of reach of the world, became all the more poignant.

xXx

Neville opened his eyes, this time free of pain and sickness. His breathing sped up as he took in his strange prison cell. He panicked, thrashing, trying to wiggle out of the bindings holding him up against the wall, but it wasn't working. He hardly moved and only managed to tire himself.

Limp, defeated, Neville hung there for what felt like hours. No sounds, no movement, immobile, he was beginning to pray that something would happen, even if that meant Death Eaters. His attention was diverted by a crack appearing along the opposite wall, turning into a door. The door swung open. Lucius Malfoy and a skeletal man with long brown hair and muddy green eyes walked in.

"Ah, he's awake. How do you feel?"

Neville said nothing, just staring at them with wide eyes as if they were speaking a different language.

The brown-haired man chuckled. "Are you hungry? I brought you something to eat." He lifted the bowel of oatmeal he carried.

Neville's eyes narrowed on the bowel. He felt energy coming from it. It was strange. It was almost like… He gasped, arching against his restraints as realization struck. It was his Earth sense. His magic was gaping wide open, desperate for contact. He hadn't felt so isolated since before his lessons with Rowena and Miss Flitwick. He was so completely cut off that he could sense the naturalness of the oatmeal, and a little bit in their clothes, when usually things of that nature were too overwhelmed by the natural living world. He looked around at his prison and realized what it was. Ice, solid ice, several feet thick separated him from Earth.

"Come on, boy, I won't hurt you," the brown-haired man said gently, lifting the spoon to Neville's mouth.

Due to Neville's height of nearly six feet and being raised off the ground, stretched against the wall,
the Gryffindor had to stare down several inches to meet the man's eyes.

"You need to eat. I know you must be hungry. It's been almost been thirty-six hours since you ate and you got sick yesterday."

Inexplicably, Neville felt tears burn his cheeks as he opened his mouth and allowed the stranger to feed him. Now that he thought about it, he did feel hungry. Not only was the oatmeal warm and filling, but it was comforting to his yearning magical senses.

The man smiled when Neville finished the bowel, making the teen blush with shame. "Come now. Don't feel bad. Is it too cold in here?" The man cast a powerful Warming Charm on him, making Neville feel as if he were in a nice sauna. "There."

"Let's go, Rodolphus," Lucius called impatiently.

Rodolphus nodded. "Fine." He met Neville's eyes again and spoke softly, as if to prevent Lucius hearing. "Don't be afraid. I'll be back soon. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Beyond confused, Neville watched the two men leave, still saying nothing. He knew it was stupid to trust anyone. He was bound to the wall in an ice prison built by Death Eaters, for pity's sake! But that didn't stop him from not wanting Rodolphus to leave. He was alone again and had plenty of time to imagine what would be done to him. His nerves were shot. He'd give almost anything for a distraction, any kind of distraction, and Rudolphus had been kind.

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Harry walked downstairs heading for the War room. He was carefully dressed again, making sure he had on his old clothes and none of the new ones he'd obtained since Severus adopted him. More importantly his features were carefully held to present Gryffindor expressions. It wasn't that difficult. He remembered being Gabriel and Harry both. Not to mention he remembered his years in Gryffindor Tower. He was Harry, after all. All it required was to merely allow different aspects of his personality to show in his expression.

It wasn't like he thought differently or felt differently now that he was Harry again, he was just more open about his bolder emotions. Being Harry was like shrugging on an old comfortable jacket. This thought reminded him of the black one he still wore. He wouldn't risk Seraphim coming Out unhindered, especially since his scar was bothering him since this morning.

He rubbed at his chest absently before entering the room where they were having the meeting. Charlie stood at the head of the table. Sixteen chairs sat around it, only half occupied. The men and women took one look at him and gaped. Some jumped to their feet, about to fire off questions, but Charlie snapped out instructions to hold their comments until everyone was present. Harry was impressed when everyone obeyed and settled back in their seats. Many of them were older than Charlie by a decade or more, which proved the deep level of respect they had for him.

He pretended not to notice every pair of eyes boring into the side of his head as he took the seat next to Charlie. Slowly the room became more full. Soon every seat was taken and people began lining up against the walls two or three people deep. The room was definitely filled to capacity. A quick counting told him there were roughly forty-eight people.

"Thank you for coming. I know this meeting was called on short notice and I've summoned you all away from assignments, but, as you can see, there has been a development." Charlie gestured at
Harry. The room was so silent, Harry thought he could hear the bald man next to him blink. "Harry has returned from his training in China. He feels he's recovered enough from the difficult event last summer and he wants to help us as he knows it is his destiny."

Complete and utter silence met this statement until a tearful Molly Weasley rose unsteadily on her feet. "Harry? Are you well? What happened to you? Do you need to see a healer?"

Harry blushed and offered her a smile. "I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. The monks took very good care of me. I'm sorry I didn't write more, but… Well… I needed the time to recover. The Death Eaters and Voldemort almost killed me. I was out of my head from the pain for several weeks afterward."

Molly pressed a hand to her mouth and sunk down into her chair.

"I propose all the team leaders explain their missions," Charlie spoke up. He gazed around the table where most of the leaders sat. "That way we can get Harry up to date."

"Is that wise?" a young woman asked from against the wall. "He's just a boy. Is he even a member of the Order?"

"Don't be stupid," Tonks yelled from her place at the table. Her hair flashed red. "Of course he's a member. This is technically his Order. We're here for him, after all."

"We're here to stop the Dark Lord!" the woman snapped back.

"We can't do that without Potter," Draco drawled. He pushed his way through the crowd so he stood at the opposite end of the table from Harry and Charlie. "Even I know that."

"Malfoy's right," Harry spoke up before anyone else could get involved in the argument. "Things like age and what should or should not be have no bearing now. I've been preparing for this. The monks made sure I can defend myself."

"It's Black now, actually." Draco smirked. He was pleased that Harry had devised this opening so he could send this point home to everyone. "I got disowned and magically adopted by your godfather, Sirius Black. I'm his Heir."

Harry stared at him for a moment before nodding his head. "Black, then. Sorry."

Draco's smile widened. "It's to be expected. You've been gone a while."

"Enough." Charlie stood and stared down the adults in the room. "We're wasting time. Every team leader will report. Tonks, let's start with you."

Tonks stood, her hair flashing pink. "My team and I are combing London, listening for gossip, jumping the Death Eater wanna-be's, and helping out where we can."

A man in his thirties or so moved forward to stand behind Tonks. He had short black hair and bright blue eyes. "Mr. Potter. I'm Stephan Pritchard and proudly work under Mrs. Lupin. My son, Graham Pritchard, is a Second-year Slytherin. I wanted you to know how much your return will mean to him and others in Hogwarts. I'm aware that you did not have to come back. Thank you."

There were agreeing murmurs throughout the crowd. Harry was a bit taken aback by the declaration, but he was very glad to know that Slytherins were represented here. "I'm Belfry McKinnon," a strawberry blond man with silver beginning to streak through the sides spoke up. He sat next to Tonks and had lively green eyes. "My second-cousin Marlene McKinnon
was in the Order the first time around. Her whole family was executed. Since then I've learned a few hunting tricks myself. I lead the team that searches north Britain for possible Death Eater hideouts.

"Charlie was telling me about that. Neville is my best friend. I think of him like a brother and his rescue is definitely on the top of my list. Are you paying attention to nature while you search? Neville is an Earth Elemental, and if he's unhappy or hurt, plant-life is affected around him. It could give us a clue as to where he is."

"I did not know that," Belfry said thoughtfully. "We will keep an eye out for such irregularities."

Harry nodded, his throat tight. Every time he thought of Neville, his lungs seemed to forget how to work. Anxiety seared through his stomach. It took everything he had not to run out of the meeting right that minute and go looking.

"My names Corey Fenwick," a young man of about twenty said cheerfully. He had dark blond hair and large brown eyes. "I lead the surveillance team for known hideouts. We're wicked good with wards so as not to let the Death Eaters know we're around and to put up triggers and tags to let us follow them about. Grand-Da was in the original Order, too. They never found but bits of him."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe you wouldn't mind me watching you work? It sounds very interesting," Harry said sincerely.

"Love ta hav ya!" Corey agreed, grinning happily.

Sturgis Podmore was next. "I and my small team are in charge of security here and at the Burrow, our secondary base."

Harry nodded, smiling wryly. "I remember from yesterday. Thought you were going to kill us."

"Careful where you're sneaking," Sturgis tried to say sternly, but his lips twitched up into a smile.

"My name is Abigail Goldstein. My son is a Ravenclaw Prefect at your school. My team and I are in charge of searching south Britain for Death Eater hideouts." She nodded her head, her mannerisms and voice elegant. "I will also keep an eye on the vegetation in the area."

"Thank you." Harry smiled at her, thinking of her son Anthony. He was in the DA and was a good fighter, although he was very suspicious of everyone.

The next man made him frown with confusion for a second. He knew that face, the blond hair and boyish blue eyes. The good-natured expression and gentle smile weren't familiar, however.

"I'm Robert Caldwell. I believe you barrowed my son, Owen's, appearance to go to the Quidditch World Cup a couple summers ago."

"Oh, yes! That's right. Thank you!" Harry beamed at him. "I had a really good time."

"I'm glad." Robert smiled at him. "My team helps provided those in need with medicine or supplies. We've established mobile clinics that help tend to those in need for free."

"That's excellent!" Harry had never thought of something like that, but it was brilliant.

"Thank you. We try." Robert laughed. "My wife is out there now. She wouldn't leave the patients."

"Tell her hello from me."

He grinned. "I will. Thank you."
Bill offered a little wave. "Hey, Harry."

"Hey, Bill. You lead a team?" Harry smiled at the older man.

"Yeah. Fleur and I, and a few others, help recruit people for the Order. We need help getting supplies and information out, little things like that."

"That's good. The people need to be kept informed, otherwise fear will get the better of them."

Bill nodded.

"I'm David Bell. You know my Katie."

"I do. She's really great."

The large man nodded. He was like a brunette Goyle. "Me and the team monitor the area around Hogwarts. We don't want an attack against Hogwarts to go without warning. We were able to limit the damage in Hogsmeade and call in help pretty quickly."

"That's a really good idea." Harry bowed his head to him. "Thank you."

A bright-eyed, silver-haired man grinned as Harry turned his eyes to him. "I'm Elphias Doge my team and I were supposed to try and find you." The old man laughed. "Mission failure, I'd say. We were chasing down all kinds of crazy rumors about you, boy."

Harry shook his head. "I'm really sorry about that, but I'm here now. Maybe your team can help those searching for Neville."

"We could do that," Elphias agreed, rubbing his chin. "What do you think, Charlie?"

"It's a good idea. Do that."

The old man nodded.

"That's all the leaders. I'm sure you'll meet everyone else individually later. For now, I want to make plans on where you'll be and what you'll be doing. You're too important to risk unnecessarily," Charlie continued.

"I want to let the Wizarding World know I'm back," Harry repeated.

Charlie smiled slowly, his eyes glinting. "I have something in mind."

xXx

Five hours later, Harry moved tiredly toward the stairs. The meeting had lasted four hours as everyone went into more detailed reports of their findings and speculations, and they hammered out the details of Harry's re-entrance into the Wizarding World. Then Molly had descended on him, crying and hugging him, practically wrestling him into the kitchen to feed him dinner. Harry had only now gotten free of her motherly clutches.

"We'll find him, Remy. I swear."

The voice, thick with emotion, drew him over to a small sitting room. Harry looked around the door and saw Remus sitting in a chair, his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking. Tonks was crouched before him, her hair dark brown with stress and worry, as she stroked his head in an attempt to soothe him.
"You don't understand, Nymph," Remus rasped, his voice hoarse and broken. "Nev is a son to me."
He lifted his head and Harry almost gasped at how awful the werewolf looked. His face was pale and gaunt, his eyes sunken and haunted.

"I know," Tonks said gently, kissing his cheeks, cleaning his face of tears. "We'll find him, my love. We will."

"The longer he's gone, the more likely we will never see him again," Remus argued dully. He had no energy left to get worked up.

"Come to bed." Tonks stood and helped her husband to his feet.

Harry quickly moved away from the doorway and hurried up the stairs. He didn't want Remus to see him. It was his fault Neville had been taken. If Seraphim hadn't been Out, Harry would have been able to save him. Remus had lost a son because of him.

Throat tight, he entered his room and leaned back against the door. "We'll find you, Nev. We will. Hold on just a little bit longer," he whispered, his eyes tightly closed.

xXx

Things were beginning to happen, which was only to the good considering the weather. Severus had endured hardship before, Merlin knew, but camping with very little magic use in the middle of February on the British Isles was topping the list. Sleet came down in painful waves, soaking his hair, making the short locks stick to his forehead and ears. He couldn't remember what had possessed him to cut his hair, but he was certain he'd never do it again. In fact, as soon as he had access to a decent potions lab, he was going to brew a growing solution.

Back in his tent, a very expensive copy of the Daily Prophet lay carefully folded. It would be impossible to receive the paper every morning. He was on the run and a paper owl would likely draw unwanted attention, so he'd forked over the coins required to have a self-renewing copy. Every morning the paper reflected that day's Daily Prophet, erasing the edition of the day before.

For the last four days, the paper reported a strange group of wizards arriving at the Ministry's muggle entrance at dawn with neutralized Death Eaters bound for delivery. The world, on the brink of panic and despair, had begun to hope, but that was nothing compared to what today's news would inspire.

There, on the front page, were a group of five hooded figures. All of them wore dark red robes with deep hoods concealing their features. On their backs was the image of a burning phoenix. At the group's feet was seven unconscious Death Eaters. What was different about today's picture was the hood of the central figure had been blown off and Harry Potter, the bane of Severus's existence, was revealed for the world to see.

Severus knew the Wizarding world would go mad after seeing this. Potter was back; they were saved. He snorted, tucking his hands more securely into his water-proof, heat-retaining magical jacket. It was absurd for the world to expect a single teenager, no matter how blasted lucky he was, to save them from an army of Dark warriors led by an insane Dark Lord. And it was infuriating that the Brat-Who-Lived played up to this madness, attention-seeking worm that he was.

Potter was now being hailed as a bloody savior, like some returned god, instead of the fraud he truly was. Those Death Eaters were mere rats. They were recruited to annoy and irritate the public, to inspire fear, but they weren't true Death Eaters. They didn't serve the Dark Lord personally as Severus once had. They didn't bathe in the Darkness under the Dark Lord's torture. They didn't experience the addicting, soul-warping power of the Dark Arts as they were used to murder and
maim. No. They weren't true Death Eaters. Severus knew the difference even if the world and that cheeky brat did not.

Crouching just inside the sparse wood, Severus's dark eyes took in the scene below. There, down in a small valley, stood Malfoy Manor. He'd come, drawn by the feel of Dark magic. He'd been watching the manor for days now and his vigil was about to pay off. A muffled crack sounded and three figures appeared before the gates: Lucius Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov, and Rodolphus Lestrange, three Inner Circle Death Eaters. Severus had found a real Death Eater lair.

Carefully, silently, Severus backed further into the woods. When he was certain he was out of sight, he returned to his make-shift camp as he considered his options. There was no way he could return to the Order. He'd be mistrusted. There was no one there to vouch for his integrity with Dumbledore dead. He had to stay clear of both groups. It was imperative. That meant he had to use someone who would be trusted to impart this critical information, and he had to do it quickly because he didn't know how long the Death Eaters would stay in this location.

Climbing into his small tent, he stood up in wizard-space. A small living room, kitchenette, bathroom, and bedroom; everything he would need. Calm, deliberate, Severus began to prepare a special brand of tea. It would relax his mind and boost his mental talents. When he was ready, he retired to his bedroom, preparing himself for this unpleasant task. He briefly considered leaving, running and saving his own life, but the memory of Lily stopped him. For her, he had to go on.

xXx

Harry strode into the War Room with a steaming cup of tea. Dark circles lay under his eyes, but Charlie knew better than to remark on them. "How did the Wizarding world respond to this morning's paper?"

"Better than we hoped," Charlie answered. He grinned and hooked his chin-length red hair behind his ear. "A group of Death Eaters tried to bully a shop on Diagon and people fought back. The lackeys were admitted to St Mungo's in critical condition. They'll be transferred to the Ministry for questioning as soon as they're stable."

Harry nodded. "Any news about Neville?"

"No. There are three locations that show abnormalities in the surrounding vegetation, but we haven't been able to narrow it down any further than that yet." Charlie caught the teenager's eyes. "We will find him, Harry. We're getting close."

Harry didn't answer. He sipped at his cup and stared around at the different reports and maps on the table and the walls. He wasn't afraid they wouldn't find Neville. He was afraid they wouldn't be in time. It had been six days since his brother had been taken from Hogwarts. That could be an eternity in Death Eater hands.

He needed to be doing something. It was driving him mad to run these stupid little infiltrations on the lackeys they'd been dropping off at the Ministry. He knew it was all for the public, to give them hope, and reveal his return, but it still felt like a waste of time. He wanted worthy opponents. Real Death Eaters, real victories. He felt hollow and desperate.

"Where are you going?" Charlie asked when Harry turned and moved toward the door.

"I'm going out with Fenwick's group." Without waiting for a response, he went upstairs.

Draco came out of the library as he saw Harry pass. The Slytherin looked just as sleep deprived, but
that wasn't surprising since Harry's nightmares had been waking them both up in the wee hours of the morning. He followed his love to the bedroom and stood in the doorway, watching and saying nothing as Harry pulled on his warmest cloak and gloves.

Harry knew he was being a prat. Every morning, Draco would hold him and get him through the aftereffects of his dreams, but as soon as they left their bedroom, Harry ignored him completely. Draco hadn't even been allowed to go with him on the raids. He knew the blond was about to reach the edge of his patience, but Harry still couldn't find it in himself to face him. He felt desperately ashamed and guilty, but he also couldn't banish the jealousy or the sense of betrayal.

"Where are you going?" Draco finally asked as Harry tried to move past him. He refused to back down and kept his body blocking the doorway.

"I'm meeting up with Fenwick's group for some training," Harry answered, keeping his eyes down and his voice steady.

Draco stepped forward, pulling the door shut behind him. He spelled the door locked and warded it for privacy. "I've let you sulk enough. We're going to talk about this."

Harry's eyes flashed up, instantly furious. "Sulk? Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"Your nightmares are getting worse and you can barely look at me during the day!" Draco yelled. If Harry cared to notice, which he didn't at the moment, he'd see that Draco's face was thinner, his eyes almost wild with a desperation that matched Harry's own.

"My nightmares have nothing to do with you!" Harry half-lied. "They're about Neville! And we're in the middle of a bloody war! We don't have time for your dramatics!"

"My dramatics," Draco growled, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "You cling to me sobbing every bloody morning, then you pretend I'm invisible! Which is it, Potter? Can't you make up your mind?"

"Fuck you!" Harry screamed, vision going red. "It's not me who can't make up his mind! Is it me you want to fuck or is it Seraphim? I'm confused!"

Draco snapped. He lashed out, bringing his fist around with all his strength as he yelled wordlessly. Harry was flung backward by the blow, grunting as he hit the floor. Draco leapt on top of him, straddling his waist and pinning his shoulders down.

"You fucking bastard," he hissed furiously. "You're a fucking COWARD!"

"Get off me!" Harry hissed, bucking his hips and hitting upward. His fist landed in the middle of Draco's chest and sent him sprawling.

Draco's head clipped the end of the bed, but the blond hardly noticed. He was up almost as soon as he landed and tackled Harry back to the ground.

"You forcing me for something I had NO CONTROL over! I didn't ask Seraphim to do what he did! I couldn't stop him! His Black magic was too powerful! You bloody well know I had nothing to do with it! It's not MY FAULT that he loves me, because you love me, you stupid prat!"

Harry's eyes widened and he gasped, going limp as Draco grabbed his shirt and shook him. "He… He forced you…?"

Panting, Draco sneered and let him go. He looked down at his lover. The messy dark brown hair
"He didn't hurt me, Shadow," he said heavily.

"That's not what I asked!" Harry snapped, hysteria rising as a panic attack compressed his lungs. Visions of sick, twisted pleasure and Lockhart's lusting expression danced behind his eyes. "Did... he force... you?" he wheezed, desperate to hear the answer.


Harry glared up at him, but he did as he was told, forcing himself to breathe slowly and deeply. "Answer... the question... Draco!"

"He started it, but I wouldn't say he forced me," Draco hedged. "I don't know what you want me to say, Shadow!"

"Did he rape you?" Harry demanded, furiously. "Just tell me the truth!" Sitting, up it was his turn to grab Draco by the shirt.

"It felt great! Is that what you want to hear?" Draco demanded.

"Just because it felt good doesn't mean it wasn't rape," Harry rasped. The bright green eyes closed, his expression tight with horror. "Please tell me I didn't do that to you."

Draco paled as he finally understood his love's fear. "No. He didn't rape me." He reached forward and cupped Harry's cheeks. "Listen to me. I didn't instigate it because I know how much it bothers you, but I'd never not enjoy being close to you in any form. I know you'd never hurt me. It was just intoxicating and overwhelming."

Harry winced and opened his eyes. Silver filled his vision as Draco stared down into his face, their lips almost touching they were so close. "It was that great, huh?" he sneered weakly, exhausted.

"Mind-blowing," Draco admitted softly. "But it wasn't the same as when I'm with you."

"Course not," Harry scoffed, disgusted and done with this whole conversation. He tried to lean away from Draco's hands, but the Slytherin held him still.

"It was too intense. I couldn't think. It was amazing, but I want to be with you. To be able to focus on us and what's going on. I love you and being with you is more than about pleasure. It's about trust and sharing an experience," Draco paused. He desperately wanted Harry to understand, but it was hard to think of the right words. "It's better when we're both present. I want to touch you. I want to see your reactions. I want you to see mine. Do you understand at all?"

Harry stared at him. He was aware of Draco's turmoil, his empathy having cracked open in his desperation to know if he'd raped him. Determination, love, loyalty, frustration; all this and more twisted and swirled within Draco like an emotional windstorm, but it was guided, sharply focused, by Draco's need to express himself, to explain and make things right again.

Harry was missed. Draco worried about him and felt wretched about not being able to help him. He was furious about being ignored, and it had deeply hurt him. Harry winced, his guilt surging twice as strong knowing he'd been the one to hurt Draco. There was no excuse for it. Draco had never hurt him intentionally and he couldn't say the same.
"Yeah. I think I do," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Draco." His arms snaked up his lover's back and he held him tightly.

Draco smiled. Happiness lit up inside him, cutting through the maelstrom like lightning. The dark emotions tattered and frayed, storm clouds banished by the sun, and Harry could only stare in wonder as Draco's utter joy washed over him.

"I love you," the blond whispered against his lips before kissing him.

It began soft and sweet. Draco's hand came up to cup the back of his head, the other arm wrapping low across his back. Harry's fingers clutched at Draco's shoulder blades as that soft tongue swiped along the roof of his mouth. Moaning, he tilted his head, allowing Draco to plunder its depths, feeling shocks of sensation all the way down to his toes as Draco gently bit down on his lower lip.

"It's weird…"

"What is?" Harry panted, feeling a bit faint. He tried to bring his mind back into focus, but just then Draco arched a bit, his hard erection rubbing sensually up his stomach, hiking his shirt up slightly. The cold air on the hot skin below his belly button made goosebumps rise along his arms.

"You feel different. Mouth is smaller," Draco murmured. "You're shorter, a bit smaller, but wider in some places, too. More muscular…" He arched against his lover again, groaning in the back of his throat at the tantalizing sensation.

"Bad?" Harry asked, almost incoherent as Draco's agile fingers tugged roughly at his hair with one hand and began unbuttoning his shirt with the other.

"No…" Draco murmured, distracted as the darker, golden skin of Harry's chest was laid bare. He bent forward and licked along the collarbone, up the shorter neck. "Taste the same… Feel the same…" His fingers quickly unbuttoned his pants, thanking Merlin that he hadn't bothered with underwear this morning. Skin on skin, Draco thrust firmly but gently against Harry's warm, soft stomach. "Soooo gooood," he practically slurred.

Harry gasped, instantly jealous of the friction Draco was getting when his own need was trapped beneath the blond's body. "Draco…" he wined softly, needily.

Draco felt his blood catch fire. He practically came right there at the sound of his lover's pleading voice. He let Harry fall back, laying him on the floor. Draco slid down his body until he was straddling his thighs instead of his lap, his hands braced on either side of his love's head. Harry's eyes were unfocused, his pupils huge and lined with vivid green. His lips were swollen and absolutely delicious.

Draco bent down to nip and suck at the addicting flesh, sliding his tongue in and out of Harry's mouth in an instinctive rhythm. Harry moaned, arching upward as Draco pressed down, rocking his hips to please his lover. Harry gasped, allowing Draco's tongue deeper as the blond snaked his hand between them to undo Harry's trousers.

"You drive me crazy," Draco rasped, half angry, half delighted.

Harry looked up into those burning eyes and grinned. His hands were suddenly locked around Draco's hips, pulling him down harder against his body. He realized he needed this almost as badly as Draco. Needed to feel wanted, loved. Wanted to feel complete. Had to have Draco with him, together, feeling the same things, needing the same things.

Draco was panting, they were both sweating, their foreheads pressed together, as their bodies rocked.
Harry whimpered, his mind clouding, and his nails dug into Draco's flesh, making him arch and gasp. Draco bent forward again, his sliver eyes knowing and hungry as his mouth closed on Harry's throat and sucked hard, his teeth biting into the vulnerable skin.

Harry cried out; he was with Draco again, every sense sharpened and aware of this moment, as if no other moment past or future ever existed or would ever exist. He needed more, needed something he couldn't name. He kept his eyes wide and locked on his lover, tasting Draco on his tongue, feeling him with every inch of his exposed skin, and suddenly it wasn't enough.

"Please…" he whispered, arching to rub his bare chest against Draco's. When had that come open? He didn't remember, didn't care, "… unh… Draco…"

"Merlin," Draco groaned, hoarse and barely hanging on to his sanity, "Shadow… You don't know what you're doing to me."

He lifted himself and quickly pulled off his pants and Harry's in one quick yank. He settled between his lover's legs and they rose instantly to wrap around his waist. Draco was panting. His hands fist on the carpet. He could barely think as Harry arched and rocked and moaned his name in that desperately needy, demanding tone. He could smell their pre-cum, the scent finally breaking his control.

He slid down, so Harry was thrusting desperately against his stomach as his arm slid between them, his finger brushing against Harry's entrance, then pressing inside. Harry gasped, eyes thrown open wide and he pulled away instinctively. Draco stopped, his hand stilling, waiting for permission.

Panting, Harry tried to understand what was going on. This was happening so fast, so fast and he couldn't breathe or think, and he still needed more. Draco was staring down at him with that consuming gaze. He felt oh so good and hot, burning hot, and then a second finger pushed in, the dull pain bringing him back from the fog that scared him.

Harry moaned, arching back on those fingers, welcoming them. He knew at an unconscious level that this was right, that this was what the heat and need had been leading up to all this time. The thought of Draco touching him, causing this pleasure and pain, feeling it with him, pushed him closer to what he was reaching for.

Draco bit and marked Harry's neck and collarbone, distracting him, keeping him ready and needy. Kissing him hard, he kept the friction going between them until Harry took up the rhythm again, rocking on his fingers harder and faster until Draco about exploded from knowing what his lover was doing to himself. He had to hold on!

He hit something inside his love and Harry screamed wildly, his nails drawing bloody furrows down Draco's shoulders. Draco couldn't take any more. He followed his lover over the cliff, adding his own cry of pleasure to Harry's and further soaking their stomachs. Collapsing bonelessly, Draco sprawled across Harry's chest.

They lay tangled together. Hot and sweaty, they tried to breathe past the aftershocks and the lethargy that settled deep in their bones. Harry was the first to stir, shifting uncomfortably under his lover. His stomach sticky and drying unpleasantly. Draco shifted to the side, freeing him and he sat up with a soft groan, still tingling from his orgasm.

Spelling his stomach clean, Harry lazily reached for his pants and pulled them on, buttoning his shirt afterward. He turned and smiled down at Draco. The blond was lying on his back, one arm flung across his forehead, still breathing deeply. Harry poked him in the side and Draco scowled up at him.
"Come on."
"Where are we going?" Draco grumbled, but he did sit up and reach for his pants.
"To train." Harry stood and ran his hands through his messy hair. He rolled his eyes in annoyance when Draco snickered at him. "I could just leave you here."

That got Draco moving. In less than three minutes, they were ready and moving downstairs.

Corey Fenwick was waiting in the kitchen, tapping his foot impatiently. When he caught sight of the two teens, his face lit up in a broad grin. "Bout time! Let's get this show on the road!"

Harry smiled at him, hoping like hell he wasn't blushing, and fell into step with the enthusiastic Order member.

Draco followed in their wake, his expression Slytherin cool and calm, only his bright eyes hinted at what they'd been doing to make them late.

xXx

Corey watched the young brunet carefully from the corner of his eye. He'd never come across anyone who picked up these spells so fast before. Well, anyone besides himself, that is. Draco Black wasn't having nearly as easy a time as Harry. He was holding a hand to his obviously pounding head, sweat beaded his forehead and dripped down his nose and ghastly pale cheeks. Harry, however, was staring around them, his eyes wide and clear.

"They are on the move. Northwest, fifty miles."

Corey murmured the spell under his breath and turned his eyes in that direction. A second vision overlaid the trees of the forest they sat in. It was disturbing to those who weren't used to it, confusing the brain and optic centers until everything blended together leaving the spell caster with a massive headache and other unpleasant symptoms. For Corey and Harry, it didn't seem to matter.

The second image, as clear as the first, the two indistinguishable, revealed a group of black-cloaked men, hoods drawn to hide their faces walking down a small town street. The sun was setting in the background behind them.

"More small fry," Corey murmured. "You can tell by the way they walk." He grinned. "Way too much swagger." A second scene came into focus briefly, of a forest and a smiling brunet smirking at him. He canceled the spell and the forest became the only existing view.

"Can we stop now?" Draco groaned.

Corey shook his head, smiling wryly. He walked over to the fallen blond and pat his head once with a laugh.

Draco growled at him.

Harry turned and looked back at his lover, dispelling the Far-Sight Spell. "Hey, you picked up the warding spells pretty good. I didn't do half so well."

It had baffled him, the wards Corey tried to teach them. Wards were usually placed on a solid foundation, like walls or doors. Corey showed them a different type of ward that attached to things more fluid like water or linked between trees. He had a feeling that Neville would have excelled at it. That thought shattered his good mood instantly.
Corey noticed the renewed dark expression on Harry's face and turned to Draco. "Come on. Don't be such a baby. Let's try it one more time."

"Are you crazy?" Draco hissed, eyes narrow slits of pain. "My head's breaking in half, I'm half frozen, and you want to try it again? You're sadistic!"

"Well, gee, I haven't been called that for a while," Corey said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. He grinned down at the fuming Slytherin. "Brings back some good memories."

"You need help," Draco replied evenly, completely serious.

Harry laughed, he couldn't help it, and Corey smirked to himself triumphantly. Harry stood, brushing off his pants. He was about to say they should head back, it was getting late and, if they missed dinner, Charlie might send out a search party. However, his words froze in his mouth when he saw something silver behind the other two. His wand snapped up.

Seeing the defensive move both Corey and Draco spun, wands raised.

A silver doe stepped daintily out of the woods.

Draco's lips moved to incant a Blasting Curse, but Corey knocked his hand down. "Don't. It's a Patronus messenger."

"I know what it is," Draco snarled. "It could still be a threat."

"I don't know of any Death Eater with a doe Patronus, do you?" Corey snorted.

Draco stiffened as the doe stepped past them, moving closer to Harry.

"I… I recognize this magic..." Harry whispered. His hand dropped down to his side. Draco cursed and tried to break Corey's hold, but Harry shook his head. "Wait, Serpentine."

The doe stopped directly in front of him. The soft looking nose stretched out and Harry found himself lifting his hand just to touch it. As soon as his hand came in contact with the Patronus, a bright silver light flashed through the clearing, blinding Draco and Corey. When they could see again, Harry was lying unconscious on the ground.

xXx

Charlie stood in the doorway, his arms crossed. Mediwitch Gladys Gloryflower was tending to Harry. Draco stood next to him, his face perfectly blank, his posture seemingly bored, but Charlie saw the tension underneath the act. Corey was sulking in the hallway, one eye swelling dramatically from where Draco had hit him.

"How is he?"

"Fine. I detect nothing abnormal. He is merely sleeping," Gladys replied, straightening. "I recommend letting him rest."

Charlie nodded and the woman made her way quickly from the tension-heavy room. His eyes cut toward Draco, but the Slytherin didn't acknowledge him. He stood with his head lowered, leaning back against the far wall, his arms crossed.

Charlie sighed. "Let me know when he wakes." He turned and gestured for Corey to follow him. He wanted a more thorough report.
Draco warded the room as soon as the two men were gone. He sat down on Harry's bed and rubbed at his face, his headache still pounding behind his eyes. The mediwitch had given him a potion, but it didn't take care of the problem completely.

"Why do you have to be so stubborn?" he asked his love tiredly.

"Because I know what I'm doing."

Draco's head snapped up just as Harry's eyes cracked open. "Hey. How do you feel?" he asked softly, leaning close so Harry wouldn't have to talk loudly. "Do you need anything?"

"Severus sent the Patronus. He sent me memories. Of a manor. Lucius and others are there."

"Did you recognize it?" Draco asked, tense with anticipation.

Harry held his gaze solemnly. "Malfoy Manor."

Draco felt cold. "One of the three places with abnormalities."

"Neville," Harry agreed, face turning cold. "He's being held at Malfoy Manor."

xXx

The War Room was filled with the most influential Order members. All the team leaders were there as well as the older more experienced members. You'd think such men and women would be immune to petty arguments.

"We have no reason to believe this is a trap!"

"Except for the fact that Draco Malfoy happened to be with Harry when he got the message to go to Malfoy Manor," Sturgis Podmore snapped furiously.

"Draco is not a Malfoy," Tonks said with a roll of her eyes. "Get over it Mr. Stogy!"

"We should show caution. Perhaps watch the place more closely for a few days," Belfry McKinnon offered as a compromise.

Harry had had enough. He'd kept quiet because he was exhausted and he trusted Charlie to bring the Order around, but it was going on an hour now. They were wasting time. "I'll go by myself if I have to." He stood and moved toward the door.

"Harry! Wait!" Remus jumped to his feet, his amber eyes intent. "I'm with you."

"As am I." Augusta stood. "If there is a chance my grandson is in that manor, I will assist you in any way I can."

"All those unwilling to participate in this mission may leave now," Charlie said firmly, his eyes cutting across the room.

Sturgis stood with a sneer. "I'll leave you to it, then. I have real missions to oversee."

Dedalus Diggle stood as well, his head lowered and eyes averted in shame as he followed Sturgis out of the room. That left nine, not including Draco, Harry, and Charlie.

The redheaded leader nodded and sealed the room as soon as the two wizards left. "Draco Black," he said seriously. "We'll need your knowledge of the manor."
"I'm prepared to help as much as I can," Draco answered, bowing in respect.

Charlie nodded, a small smile turning up his lips. "Then let's get to work, ladies and gentlemen. We have a lot of work ahead of us."

xXx

They spent six hours planning the attack. Molly brought them food, tisking worriedly over Draco and Harry's involvement. Charlie ignored her pointed stares. They didn't really have energy to spare reassuring Molly, anyway. What they were planning to do was very complicated and it wouldn't have even been possible without Draco's help.

After a few hours of sleep, those with Animagus ability slowly crept toward Malfoy Manor fifteen minutes before the sun was due to rise on Monday, February 22nd. Draco had revealed that the manor wards had a vulnerability. There were two different system of wards; one that activated at night, the other that activated during the day.

There was an opening of only a few minutes when the night wards switched to the day wards, but even then the manor was well guarded. Draco believed that animals might not be noticed during the switch over. Therefore, those who were Animagus would slip in and try and weaken the wards for those waiting outside for the signal to attack.

Of the ten Order members on the mission, five were Animagus. Draco and Harry would attempt to sneak in through the back, while Bill, Corey, and Belfry McKinnon attempted the front. Stephen Pritchard, Elphias Doge, Charlie, Remus, and Tonks would surround the manor right outside the wards and wait for an opening.

A sleek lynx padded forward on silent feet, the tuffs on his ears twitching this way and that, his eyes wide and unblinking as they stared at the manor. The pale peacock at his side fluttered its feathers, but the tail remained down and tight in one long line. The wards wavered. The lynx leaped forward while the peacock let out a harsh cry and exploded into the air.

The call was returned as a small flock of albino peacocks came fluttering into view. The lynx came up short as the birds screamed, guarding their territory. The large white peacock flew among them, landing lightly. Its harsh voice broke through the night and, after a moment of terrible noise and fuss, the flock settled down.

The lynx snorted. Its tail lashing with humor as the white peacock's tail rose in a gorgeous display; its delicate neck preening. The flock gurgled and shifted around the new male, giving him space and ignoring the recipient of the display. The back door to the manor opened, spilling a golden square of light out into the garden.

The man looked around. He cast a quick revealing spell, but it came back negative for humans. He scowled at the birds. "Shut up, you bloody annoying birds!" The flock scattered as the man picked up at rock and tossed it at them. "Don't know why Malfoy keeps these things around…"

The door shut and the lynx crept forward, coming even with the white peacock. His long, rough tongue swiped out and brushed along its head feathers. The peacock squawked and the lynx padded toward the door. He had no way to open it without turning human again, but he knew if he did that he might set off alarms. Suddenly a black clad arm shot out and quickly cracked the door. The lynx darted in as Draco followed, shutting the door behind them.
"I may not be a Malfoy in magic or name, but technically I still have Malfoy blood. With all these strangers in the house, no one should detect anything if I stay human," the blond explained in a whisper.

The lynx nodded, its attention already turned to their surroundings. The hallway was plain and unadorned, but that only emphasized the high quality of the carpet and gilded ceiling. Ears twitching, listening for any sound, he could smell the man who'd opened the door.

"The dungeons are this way. Longbottom will probably be there," Draco murmured, pointing in the direction the man had gone.

The lynx's hackles rose. He would save his brother. Nothing would stop him.

xXx

Neville writhed, voice hoarse from screaming. Lucius stood before him, his laughter cutting through his brain like broken glass. Dark magic emanated from him as he cast spell after spell at the ice walls. Open, raw, vulnerable, the darkness seeped into Neville's soul, making him twist and cry out desperate to escape the foul magic. Vomit coated the front of his shirt. Its acrid smell making his stomach roll and bile burn the back of his already raw throat. He wanted to claw out of his own skin just to escape. If his arms weren't restrained, he would have done just that.

"Enough, Malfoy," a deep voice barked.

Hanging limp, Neville panted, drenched with sweat. Looking up through his bangs and lashes, he saw Rodolphus standing in the doorway. Hope spiked inside him and he had to bite his lip not to call out to his only friend or break down into tears of utter relief.

"The Dark Lord wants to speak to you."

Lucius turned disappointed eyes on the Gryffindor. "I'll be back soon, boy. Then you'll tell me about that monster. You'll tell me everything I want to know."

Neville whimpered, his legs trembling in sheer terror, even after Lucius slipped out of his cell.

A gentle hand cupped his cheek, offering him water as Rodolphus spelled the sickness away from his clothes and the floor. "Neville. I'm so sorry. Are you okay? You just have to hang in there. You're doing so great."

Neville sobbed quietly, unable to help himself. "Th-thank y-you."

"Don't thank me," Rodolphus said gently, his eyes deep and warm. "Not until I get us out of here."

"I… I just want to go home," Neville rasped, broken.

"I know." Rodolphus brushed the bangs off his forehead. "Soon. I promise."

Neville nodded weakly, shuddering and trembling. He didn't know how much more he could take. He felt sick, weak, and desperately afraid. More than that, he felt dreadfully tired.

"I hate to ask this of you, Neville, especially since you're being so strong."

"What?" he asked, looking up again. "What's wrong?"

Sudden panic speared through him, making his palms sweat and his lungs to tighten. Rodolphus was the only thing in this place that kept him sane. He'd fall apart without his help. He couldn't count all
the times the man had cleaned him up and encouraged him to have hope. He even snuck him food and water instead of the stale bread Lucius fed him.

"They're getting suspicious of my loyalties," Rodolphus murmured, lines of worry bracketing his eyes. "I... I overheard them talking... They're going to interrogate me. Tonight..."

Neville whimpered, his eyes wide as he stared at his one and only lifeline.

"If... If I get you out of this cell... If you connect to Earth once again, will you... Will you help me, Neville? We can escape. Together," Rodolphus said softly, his expression intense.

The teen gasped, "...escape..." It was all he could think about, but now that the moment had come, he felt almost too scared to try. What would happen if they failed? What would Lucius do to them then?

"Please, Neville. I don't want you to be hurt anymore. I'm willing to risk it because this is the last time I will be able to help you. After tonight, I'm not going to be around." His gentle hands brushed at Neville's cheeks, erasing the tears.

"O-Okay," Neville stuttered. "I'll d-do it."

"Good." Rodolphus smiled, eyes bright with pride and making Neville feel warm. "Very good." His smile faltered as he became serious. "You understand, don't you, Neville? You have to hit hard and fast. They won't hesitate to kill us. We can't hesitate, either."

Neville closed his eyes tight. "Yes. I understand."

"Then lets do this. Together." Rodolphus brought his wand up and incanted a very specific fire charm.

The ice incasing Neville's right wrist dissolved. The teen cried out in pain as his arm fell to his side for the first time in a week. The second wrist came free. He was sobbing now, leaning against Rodolphus's chest.

"Come on. You can do this, Neville," Rodolphus whispered in his ear. "We have to hurry. They'll know something is wrong. They'll sense my magic. You half to get up, Neville. Get up!"

Neville tried, but his legs wouldn't hold his weight. The door to his cell burst open. An unknown man aimed his wand at Rodolphus's back. His savior screamed, his back arching horrifically.

"No..." Neville gasped, reaching for his friend.

"Die, traitor!" the man yelled hatefully, eyes wide with fanaticism.

Heart pounding fiercely in his chest, acid fear coating his stomach and throat with its familiar burn, Neville stared wildly forward and realized the door to the cell was still open. Lucius was always so careful to enter and leave quickly. Through that small opening, the Earth lived and thrived, not like this desolate prison.

Crying out desperately, Neville reached for the magic he'd been denied for a week, reached for the magic that made up his very soul, and it answered his cry, pouring into him with a sound like thunder. The ice on the walls cracked and then shattered violently.

The man in the doorway released a gurgling cry, his throat cut. Blood quickly spread along the slick ice floor, but Neville didn't see. His eyes were wide and unseeing as he sat on his knees, head
thrown back, arms limp beside him. He was completely overwhelmed by magic, by life, by the
world he was once again a part of. The magic welcomed him; it had mourned when he'd been cut off
from it.

Neville could feel it outside, calling him, the dirt, the trees, the very soil. All he had to do was step
forward out of the cell. Bright flames encased in short-lived mortal flesh stood in his way, but he
wasn't going to allow them to keep him from the Earth. Never again. He was going to leave this
place of pain and illness, and he was never going to return.

"Yes, Neville. Good. We're going to get out of here. You and me."

Neville stood, the Earth pouring strength into his body, filling him when for so long he'd been empty.
Rodolphus leaned on his shoulder and Neville easily supported his weight. They were going to get
out of here. They were going to be free. Nothing was going to stop him.

xXx

A Blasting Curse shot by one of the minions guarding the manor slipped around Draco's shield.
Propelled backward, the lynx rolled end over end down the hard concrete stairs. He slid once he
reached the bottom in a clumsy sprawl of limbs along the slick dungeon floor. Sneezing, the lynx
transformed back to his human form. Harry opened his eyes to darkness that hadn't seemed nearly so
black a second ago, but on the plus side the smell of feces, sickness, and mildew was also blessedly
muted.

"Watch out!" Draco called from above.

Harry dove to the side, impacting a wall sooner than he thought and wincing as a layer of skin was
scrapped off his palms. A loud thud sounded where he'd been standing a moment before. Spinning,
he cast a faint Lumos to see the man lying unconscious, blood trickling out of his obviously broken
nose.

"Ouch," Harry murmured, smirking.

Draco laughed, coming down the stairs quickly two at a time. "I locked the door, so we should have
a few moments uninterrupted."

Harry grinned at his friend. The blond was disheveled, his shirt torn open along one shoulder,
revealing almost half his chest. Dirt smudged one cheek while dried blood made his hair stick up
right above his ear.

"The others should keep the Death Eaters and bodyguards busy for a while. We should still hurry."
Draco moved forward, past Harry, and down the dark hall toward the cells.

Harry hurried after him. "Do you know if Lucius is here?" he asked, his smile disappearing.

"I don't think so. He'd have come here first," Draco murmured, wand pointed at the first barred metal
door.

Harry moved to the second and began every unlocking spell he knew. Draco had his door open
before him and called "empty" before moving on down the line. There were a good twelve cells to
be checked. They worked as quickly as they could, the silence punctuated by occasional bangs and
cries from the battle upstairs.

Harry kept one eye on the stairs, just in case. He'd stayed in his Animagus form to prevent total panic
and to avoid becoming the main target. He wasn't here for the fight. He was here to free Neville.
Harry felt painful disappointment claw up his throat. Now that the adrenaline of the fight was dissipating, he was desperate to find his brother.

"Got someone!" Draco called and Harry hurried over to his side. "A goblin, looks like."

Draco was right. A beaten goblin was chained in the corner of the tiny five by five cell. His luminous yellow eyes regarded them with a nasty snarl. Harry sneered back.

"We're here to free you," Draco snapped. He cut the chains free, but the goblin still regarded them suspiciously.

Harry turned without a word and worked on the next door. Please be here, Nev, he prayed. The door swung open and Harry peered in. An old man lay on the floor. His fragile skin bruised and cut in several places.

"Ollivander," Harry breathed. He moved forward reluctantly and touched the man's throat. He already knew what he'd find. The old man was dead.

"Harry, come here!"

Gently touching the man's forehead in farewell, Harry swallowed down his sorrow and rose. Draco was standing at the end of the hallway at a door. It was different than the others. The metal was so flat and shiny it acted almost as a mirror. There was no handle, most likely opening by magic alone.

"It leads down to the next floor where they keep the cell of the Imprisoned Earth-Child."

Harry spun at the low sound of the goblin's voice. "How do we get in?"

"I know not the magic of wizards," the last was said with a hateful sneer. The creature's eyes were narrowed in absolute disgust as he stood naked and injured, his right arm tight across his ribs.

"Listen, Goblin," Harry said softly, carefully, anger boiling under his skin. "We've just set you free. You owe us a life-debt at the very least. We're not asking you to perform the magic just to tell us the words."

The goblin stared up at Harry, silent and malevolent, when suddenly he gasped. His eyes turned toward the door as his filthy, drooping ears perked almost straight up. A twisted smile stretched his face revealing shark-like yellow teeth. "The Earth-Child awakens. Now we shall see the wrath of the Mother for you kcilitin wizards."

Draco felt the ground tremble beneath his feet. He looked down, frowning. The vibrations slowly built until the loose pebbles on the floor began to rattle and jump. He looked up into Harry's shocked be-speckled eyes. "I think we should run."

"But Neville…"

"Is escaping and likely to think those in the dungeon are here to keep him locked up. We should clear the way for him." Draco didn't know what was going on, but the look on the disgusting goblin's face and his instincts told him that something very bad was coming. Meeting it here in these close confines didn't set well with him. "Come on, Harry." He moved forward and grabbed his love's arm.

Harry was not pleased. He came here to rescue Neville, not run from him, but Draco did make some sense. They should make sure the path was clear. He had a feeling that Neville wouldn't be able to keep up any kind of attack. He'd grow tired quickly.
Harry looked back one last time and frowned when he saw the goblin limping after them, still grinning, but obviously just as determined to get out of the way. Dark red blood, almost black, smeared the floor where his leg dragged behind him.

Together, the two teens and the goblin hurried up the dungeon stairs. They were just unlocking the door when they heard metal scream as it was torn and bent. *The mirror door,* Harry thought. *Neville.* He turned to go back when Draco grabbed his arm hard. Harry opened his mouth to pull away when a man with blood drenching half his face came around the corner.

He froze, his eyes immediately going to Harry's forehead. Mouth hanging open in shock, he spelled a containment spell with an amazing amount of power behind it. Harry and Draco dove to opposite sides of the hall, erecting shields to protect themselves from the spell as it whooshed past. This was obviously not a weak minion but a true Death Eater.

"I've got him!" Draco yelled, stepping forward to the center of the hallway, his stance strong and determined. "Use the Far-Sight Spell to find a way out!"

Harry didn't even hesitate. Trusting in Draco's ability to keep them safe, he closed his eyes and murmured the spell he'd just learned. Instead of watching the battle between Draco and the Death Eater, he was zipping down hallways. He saw Pritchard fighting two lackeys in a sitting room. A couch was on fire, the smoke making the battle seem even more nightmarish. A woman screamed in agony as Pritchard pressed forward, face completely devoid of emotion. Three more minions ran into the room, jumping to the woman's defense, but Harry didn't think Pritchard would have trouble with them.

His mind turned and ran along a different path. It was too busy down that way. He found the front Entrance Hall. Remus, Bill, and Tonks were fighting four Death Eaters. One was Bellatrix, her mad cackle instantly recognizable. He turned away, looking for a path clear of the madness.

They had to get out quickly. The Order couldn't win like this. More minions and Death Eaters were arriving every minute. He had to find the path of least resistance to get Neville out, then they could all activate their portkeys. Without knowing the password, like the bad guys obviously did, they couldn't portkey out of the house proper. Once outside, they should work.

"Harry!"

He blinked and saw Draco panting at the end of the hall. His bare shoulder was bleeding, only the blond's hand slowed the red river. Harry canceled the sight spell and ran forward, already casting a localized Impediment Spell to prevent any more blood from leaving his love's body.

Draco grimaced, his face pale. "We have to go."

Harry noticed his worried eyes weren't on the unconscious Death Eater at their feet but behind them. Eyes wide, Harry realized the walls were beginning to shake. The goblin was cackling with evil glee as it rushed past.

"Come on, Harry." Draco grabbed his wrist and tried to pull him after the goblin.

"Wait. Neville…" Harry protested.

"We still have to clear the way," Draco insisted, knowing Harry wouldn't understand the sudden gut-deep apprehension he had of meeting their Gryffindor friend. He pulled hard and thanked all the gods when Harry moved with him.

"Northeast, side exit, opens onto a dirt path surrounded by low stone walls," Harry reported.
"I know where that is," Draco confirmed, grateful. His shoulder was a burning fire, but he forced it out of his mind for now. They had to get out of here.

They hallway branched right and left, rooms opening up on either side with large archways. Art began to decorate the hall; sculptures stood on marble half-pillars. A painting up ahead shook and rattled against the wall before falling completely off, the frame cracking almost in two at the impact on the hard floor.

"Inasterum," a yell came from behind them.

Draco and Harry spun to see three lackeys come barreling toward them. Harry slashed out with his wand reflexively and their Dark spell splashed harmlessly against his shield and ricocheted into the wall. The wallpaper curled up and disintegrated, revealing smooth white stone underneath. Draco had a return curse on his lips, but he never uttered it. He watched in morbid fascination as the last guy went rigid, his mouth falling open as he screamed in agony.

"What the…" Harry breathed.

The other two minions spun around at their friend's cry, stupidly leaving their backs vulnerable to Harry and Draco. Luckily for them the teens were too shocked by what was happening that they didn't move to attack.

The afflicted guy grasped at his chest. Something green was spilling through his fingers and Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion. The man's screams rose an octave, mindless with the pain. Only Draco's hand on his shoulder prevented Harry from rushing forward. The two other Death Eater wannabes were on their knees, screaming with the first guy.

Neville stepped into the hall. Harry gasped. His brother was thinner, his face slack and smooth. His eyes were completely black and wide, staring forward unseeingly as he stepped forward at an even pace. The ground shook harder the closer he came. Suddenly, a cotton tree exploded upward as the first man's screams cut off abruptly. Harry stared in horror. The tree had grown from the cotton of the man's shirt and was now using the corpse as its soil, the roots wormed and knotted around the body, inside it and around it, coated in red blood.

"Neville," Harry whispered.

"Run," Draco ordered, hand clamped so hard on Harry's shoulder it would leave bruises. "Harry, we need to run!"

Two more trees exploded upward, silencing the horrific screaming. The ground was shaking harder, almost at earthquake levels. Paintings and sculptures crashed to the ground. The trees waved as if in a faint breeze as Neville walked past, the leaves almost lovingly caressing his cheeks and neck.

"Harry! He's out of it! We have to go!"

"Neville!" Harry yelled, ignoring Draco and pulling forward.

A deep laugh slowly rose over the noise of the manor shaking all around them. A man with thin brown hair and broken yellow teeth stood behind his brother. His face was suffused with triumph, his pale hands clasped familiarly on Neville's shoulders.

"Rodolphus Lestrange," Draco murmured, still trying to pull Harry backward. "Bellatrix's husband."

"Lestrange!" Harry gasped, eyes snapping back to Neville's slack face. "Neville, what are you doing? He's a Death Eater!"
"He was one of the ones who cursed your parents!" Draco added his voice.

"Oh, no, I already explained that I tried to stop Bella that night. I tried to tell her we had to go, but she cursed me, too," Rodolphus called back, a horrible grin twisting his face. "I would never want to see Neville hurt!"

Draco felt his torn shirt twitch, he felt the fibers growing thicker and twitching against his skin. Horrified, he yanked Harry backward and to the side. They both fell into a small reading room. They rolled across the floor as books jumped and trembled, falling off their shelves. Harry jerked away from him, trying to untangle their limbs.

"Let go!"

"He's out of his mind! We have to get out of here!" Draco yelled back.

"Not without Neville!" Harry finally pulled free and ran back toward the door.

Draco ran after him. Neville had already gone past and turned down a hall that led to the front of the manor. Screams began shortly after. Running after him, they peered around the corner to see a woman in leather tearing at her clothes, revealing the cotton undergarments coming to life. Beyond her, Remus, Bill, and Tonks were there dueling three Death Eaters. The Death Eaters heard the horrific screams coming from the woman and turned. They took one look at Neville and Rodolphus and Apparated away.

"Neville! It's me, Remus! We came to save you. I'm sorry we took so long, cub, but it's time to go home!"

A spell caught Draco's arm and spun him face first into a wall. Groaning and cursing himself for not paying attention, he looked to see Harry in a duel with Rodolphus who stood at Neville's back. The Gryffindor's head turned slowly, the black orbs his eyes had become focusing in Harry's direction.

"Neville! It's me!" Harry screamed desperately as he shielded curse after deadly curse from Rodolphus.

"Don't listen to them," Rodolphus growled. "They're trying to confuse you. They want to capture us. They'll take me and kill me."

Neville's eyes narrowed and the trembling worsened, throwing both Harry and Draco off their feet. Draco's eyes snapped toward Harry when he heard a pained, startled gasp. Harry's clothes were transforming into vines already burrowing through skin and bone, looking for the nutrient rich organs.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, horrified as the thin back arched, an anguished shriek tearing through his throat. "Transform! Now!" he ordered, rolling and coming up beside his love, casting furiously at Rodolphus. He made the man back-step and hastily erect shields. "Don't do this to me. Come on, Harry. Stay with me. You're all right."

Pritchard and Corey ran forward from a side hall, casting their own spells. Draco's attention was on Harry as his love slowly transformed into a lynx. The clothes were left behind since they were now projecting magic foreign to Harry, but the damage had been done. He was bleeding from several wounds that went much too deep. Whimpering, panting, the large cat lay on its side, eyes wide and tongue protruding from its mouth.

Neville must have sensed the change and thought Harry was no longer a threat, for his head turned forward again, facing Pritchard and Corey now. Draco yelled a warning, but he wisely stopped
casting at Rodolphus. Instead, he focused on shielding. He didn't want Neville's attention again. He was desperately terrified for his love. Harry was bleeding so much, his breathing sounded wet and wheezy, but still his golden eyes wouldn't leave Neville.

More Order members poured into the room, shouting reports. All the Death Eaters had fled. Neville attacked Elphias Dodge, the old man's cries sending the others scattering backward out of range of the deranged teen's influence. Bill cast at the vines again and again, but they kept growing back and in a few minutes a new tree stood tall, Elphias silenced, dead.

Rodolphus laughed. "Yes! We're almost free, Neville. Just a few more and we'll be outside and we won't be hurt anymore!"

"He helped torture your parents, Neville! Don't listen to him! He's using you!" Tonks cried desperately.

Neville moved forward again, the spells the Order shot at him bouncing and reflecting off his unbreakable shields, rooted in the Earth. Rodolphus moved with him, keeping one eye on Draco, though he wasn't too worried. The blond's attention was on trying to heal the fallen hero.

"Reducto!" Pritchard yelled as McKinnon cast, "Tepurmidum!"

"See, they're trying to hurt us, Neville!"

"We're only trying to hurt you, Death Eater!"

"Stop attacking, defense only!" Charlie bellowed, helping Tonks regain her feet.

The ground was shaking so badly that they were all having a hard time now. Their footing was so bad their spells were going astray. Pritchard had almost hit Bill. Cracks were appearing in the walls and floor, dust was raining ominously down on them from the ceiling. Rodolphus was laughing, hands clamped on the teen's shoulders.

"Snap out of it, Neville!" Remus snapped harshly, stepping forward with golden eyes. "You don't know what you're doing!"

"Harry!" Draco gasped as the lynx wavered and slowly turned human again.

Neville and Rodolphus were halfway down the hall by now, the Order members were pressed backward, almost at the front doors. Soon they would be forced outside and Neville would escape with Rodolphus. Draco knew his love would try something desperate, but was terrified it would cost Harry too dearly. To his astonishment, however, the horrific wounds began to heal as Harry screamed, the sound so desperate that Draco instantly realized what had happened.

"Seph," he whispered, shocked.

The alter swiped the glasses off his face, his green eyes dark and rich with the powerful magic contained in his small body. He was breathing heavily, as if he'd run long and hard to get here, sweat coated his forehead, pasting the thick, dark hair to his face. This was good because Seraphim's magic had dispelled the glamour that created the lightning bolt image there. The green eyes stared forward, locked on Neville's back.

"Seph," Draco said urgently, eyes wide. "Don't hurt him. He doesn't mean it. He's hurt and confused."

The green eyes turned to him and were so hard and focused they pinned Draco in place. "Stay."
The blond found himself nodding obediently to that demand. Seraphim smiled and touched his cheek very briefly with his finger tips before climbing to his feet. He swayed, completely naked, magic beginning to swirl around him in powerful, invisible waves. Draco bit his lip, terrified he's made the wrong decision, but for some reason something in Seraphim's expression reassured him that he was going to take care of this. That he didn't have to be afraid. Seraphim clenched his fists, his heart pounding hard against his ribs as he ran forward. The strange man that stood in his way lifted one of those deadly little sticks, his face twisted with a wide smile that brought back flashes of the graveyard, being circled and tortured. The man’s laughter echoed just the same as the laughter then, and with a scream of rage, he flung his right fist forward, releasing a blast of Black. The magic exploded from him, streaked across the shortening distance between them, and struck the man in the chest. Eyes wide, not even having time to scream, Rodolphus was flung off his feet with a hole half a foot wide in his chest. There was no blood spatter, no gore. It was as if the flesh had just vaporized. The corpse slid backward into a group of strangers, but Seraphim didn't focus on them. They weren't laughing or pointing their sticks at him. Instead, he focused on the brown-haired teen with black orbs for eyes. He knew what he had to do. The strange trees in the hallway shuddered as the Black magic brushed by them. Now they whipped around in a frenzy, the branches growing and whipping out, trying to strike Seraphim down, but he would not fall. He dodged and jumped, still running forward. It was as if time had slowed. His hands tingled and slapped out whenever a branch came too close, and the brown-haired teen would scream as the tree branches withered and died. Leaping, Seraphim launched himself at the teen's chest. His mate was screaming his name, fear in his voice. The others were screaming a name he did not know. He ignored both of the calls, focused entirely on his target. He hit the teen's chest and bowled him backward. Landing hard, they skid for a few feet before coming to a stop. The building was shaking so hard that it was beginning to come down around them. The ceiling collapsing. Panting, frightened, Seraphim lashed his hands forward and pressed his palms flat on both of the boy's cheeks. Magic welled up inside him, burning bright and spilled over, pouring through his hands as he channeled it from the high, bright place. He arched, as if struck by lightning, while the brown-haired teen's reaction was even more dramatic. He went rigid, the walls of the hall around them exploding outward.

Neville blinked, his body jerking as he was yanked from the depths of the Earth magic. The first thing he became aware of was the tremors wracking his body, then he realized it wasn't his body but the ground slowly stilling. Large broken stones and debris boxed him in, covered his body, and suddenly he began crying. It was hard to breathe. He was so confused. Morning sunshine poured down onto his face through a hole in the roof, the sun beams perceptible in all the dust. From far away he could hear groans as the rubble shifted. Neville was terrified that this was a new kind of torture. They were going to come for him. They were going to hurt him so bad. Was this his fault? Had he made this mess? Hyperventilating, whimpering, he began to struggle free of whatever was pinning him down.

"Shhh, shhh," a rough voice soothed him. Gasping, Neville looked to the right to see exhausted green eyes peering over at him. "Harry!" he
cried, voice breaking with tears and fear. His brother was lying naked a foot away. Rubble covered his legs, trapping him. "Your back," he gasped, eyes wide with horror. Blood from scrapes and deep cuts drenched the tanned skin.

"Tired," Harry responded.

Neville scrambled into a sitting position, pushing at the debris that had fallen all around him. The ceiling had collapsed, opening the house to the outside. Behind him, he could see people slowly beginning to stand, escaping more rubble. His eyes went wide as he recognized a man with grey-streaked hair.

"Remus!" he called with desperate gratitude. "Remus!"

The werewolf turned and saw him. Immediately he was running forward, climbing over the debris carelessly before falling to his knees next to Neville. They clung to each other, both crying. The werewolf stroked his hair and back while whispering how worried he was and how glad he was that Neville was okay.

"Oh Merlin, Remus, I thought… I thought…" He couldn't finish, voice gone as he sobbed into his mentor's robes.

"You're safe, I'm here. No one's going to hurt you anymore," Remus murmured fiercely, rocking the distressed teen.

The sound of whimpering sobs drew their attention. They both hurried forward when they saw Harry trying to drag himself clear of the rubble, hurting himself in the process. The teen flinched violently away from their hands, exposing his teeth in a silent snarl.

Neville covered his mouth with a shaking hand, the other still tangled up fearfully in Remus's torn robe sleeve. "Seraphim," he realized.

Remus's eyes went wide with understanding. "We're not going to hurt you," he told the damaged alter. "We just want to help get you free."

"Is everyone okay?" Charlie called from across the way. "Count off!"

"One," Tonks shouted, her hair droopy and brown with fatigue.

"Two," Bill added, pulling Corey out from under a destroyed painting.

"Three," Belfry McKinnon called, rolling his eyes at the young tracker's out of sequence response.

"Four," Stephan Pritchard groaned. He was leaning against what was left of the wall. His stomach was coated with blood, having been almost cut completely open. His right arm looked broken. Tonks and Charlie hurried over, administering first aid.

"Seven," Arthur said coming in from the garden. He'd been blown completely out of the manor. "Six is dead," he added, reporting for Elphias Doge. They didn't want to use names incase there were recording spells in place that the Death Eaters would collect later. The less the Dark Lord knew about the Order, the better.

"Eight," Remus shouted, still clutching Neville to him as they watched Harry wiggle out from under the heavy stone wall without help. "And nine. Harry's with me. He's fine, just a bit winded and busy
"Ten?" Charlie demanded, asking after Draco. "Lestrange?"

Neville gasped. "Rodolphus… Where is he? Is he okay?" He looked around wildly for his friend.

Remus's eyes darkened with pity. "He's dead, Neville. He attacked us and made you think we were your enemies. He was using you."

Neville stared at him, blood draining from his already pale face. The brown orbs looked huge in his thinner face. "No. No, he was helping me. He was getting me out."

"I don't know what happened to you, Nev, but I do know that Rodolphus Lestrange was not a good guy," Remus said gently, touching the teen's cheek. Neville flinched away from the gesture, his arms coming up around his chest. "I'm sorry, cub. Really I am. But you're safe now."

"Draco…" Seraphim moaned, standing.

He swayed and flinched away from Remus's hand when it came up to help him. He growled as best he could. It wasn't as good as when he was in his other form, the one with wings. Shaking his head, he focused on what mattered. He crawled back toward the house, focusing on his mate.

"Draco!" he called, voice rough. He could sense him. The feather on Draco's collarbone called to him, telling him that his mate was hurt but alive.

"One, see if you can get Four outside. Go back to headquarters. Remus, go with her. Take Neville," Charlie ordered, taking charge. "Seven, Three, see if you can't retrieve Six's body. Five, Two, come with me. We have to get Draco out quickly. We don't know how long we have until the Death Eaters return."

Everyone moved to obey. Neville was dazed and going into shock. Too much had happened. His mind, body, and magic were in turmoil. Words seemed to distort around him. He had no idea what all the noise meant. All he knew was that Remus wouldn't hurt him. Remus wanted him to keep moving, so he numbly let him lead him away from the rubble and out into the sunshine.

Charlie climbed over to where Harry, naked, was trying to physically lift the rubble away. They had to be careful. Shifting the debris could injure Draco further, but he needed to get closer before he could use his wand. He was unprepared however when Harry turned, his eyes narrowed dangerously, a look of hate twisting his face.

"Get away! Don't come any closer!" Seraphim snarled, tense and afraid. Draco was trapped, he was hurt. Seraphim wouldn't let these people near them, wouldn't let them hurt them anymore.

"Harry?" Bill asked carefully, confused, as he came even with his brother.

"Get Away From Us!" Seraphim roared, all the more panicked by the lack of magic within his grasp. He was still too tired to reach for the Black. Channeling the White, keeping it in control, had taken all his strength.

Charlie extended his arms and backed carefully away, pulling Corey and Bill backward with him. "Hey, it's okay. We won't hurt you," he said softly. "No one take out your wands. Don't threaten him in anyway."

"What's going on?" Bill demanded, but he kept his voice low.
"Draco… Draco…" Seraphim chanted, voice rough with fear and worry. He tore at the rubble with his bare hands; his palms split, fingernails broke.

"Corey," Charlie murmured in less than a whisper, "use your Sight Spells. See where Draco is. Then I want you to very carefully take your wand out. Make sure Harry can't see it. Use Bill and I as a partial shield. Lift the debris off Draco. Quickly now."

Tears were dripping down Seraphim's face. His fear was growing with every second. His breathing came harsh and quick through his raw throat as his sense of his mate began to flicker and fade. "DRACO!" he howled desperately, frantically clawing at rubble that hardly moved as he pushed and shoved. It was too heavy!

Suddenly, the stone and plaster shifted and he saw a pale arm. "Draco!" he cried in relief. He grasped that arm and his blood-soaked palm slid easily around the warm skin. Sobbing in relief, his other hand reached out and grasped his mate's strong wrist. He hunched down, ignoring the useless babble from the people behind him.

They wanted him to come, but he wouldn't. They were trying to trick him. They would hurt them. Well, Seraphim was done being hurt. He was going to protect his pack from everyone else. Reaching deep inside himself, begging subliminally for the magic to please, please, please be there, to please answer his call, he reached as far as he could, deeper than he ever had to reach before when magic usually filled him so easily, so completely…

Seraphim gasped, his eyes flying open as he found the strength he needed. Shadows from within what was left of the manor slowly, then rapidly, came rushing toward him. Darkness came from under the rubble, from the Order's shadows, and converged over Seraphim and Draco. And then as if nothing had happen, the sun shone on the spot where they had been and the shadows were gone. Seraphim and Draco had both disappeared without a sound.

"What was that?" Bill demanded again.

"Let's go. I'll explain back at headquarters." Charlie turned and saw that the other two had retrieved their fallen comrade's body and something else.

"We found an injured goblin," Arthur reported. "Looks like he's been tortured."

"Bring him with us," Charlie decided and gestured everyone outside into the courtyard.

Once clear, they all reached for their portkeys, activating them within seconds of each other and disappearing in a small whirlwind. Corey was last. He bit his lip, his usually excited grin far from his expression.

"Be safe," he whispered before he, too, disappeared without a sound.

Chapter end.
Calm Before the Storm

Charlie moved through Grimmauld Place with a grim expression. Elphias Dodge's body was laid out in a sitting room, his mother, Fleur, and Andromeda Tonks were preparing him for a private burial. Pritchard, McKinnon, and the goblin needed healing and were waiting in a separate sitting room for Mediwitch Gloryflower's attention. She was upstairs tending Neville with Remus and Lady Longbottom's assistance. As much as he wanted to go and check on the teen, to debrief him about anything he may have revealed about Harry or the Order, Charlie went instead to the War Room.

The room was full of members waiting to be told how the raid went even though they all knew it had been a success. They suffered only one casualty, and Neville was obviously back with them. Sturgis was looking rather stiff-faced and so were his supporters.

"The mission was a success. Neville is back with us and Malfoy Manor was destroyed. There were eight high ranking Death Eaters in residence and at least fifteen lesser minions. Three of the Death Eaters were killed, as well as at least nine of the minions."

"I want to know what happened to Harry," Bill said firmly, refusing to back down.

"Harry was severely injured this summer," Charlie answered easily, holding his eyes. "His body made a recovery, but his mind is still fragile. He reverted to a more feral state when inflicted with pain surpassing normal levels."

"Harry was hurt?" a young witch from Corey's team demanded.

Those who went on the raid shared an uneasy glance, remembering what Neville’s magic had done, but they knew better than to say anything. Charlie had already made it clear that Neville's abilities were classified.

"Yes, but not seriously," Charlie answered. "He has retreated to recover his equilibrium and will return soon."

There was a collective sigh of relief from the group, but Bill was not satisfied. He caught his brother's eye and made it clear he wanted to talk.

Charlie clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "Okay, you guys. We have a lot to be thankful for and an Order member to remember. How about we all take the day off?"

As the group began to disburse, those who went on the mission were cornered. Corey played up to the attention, already giving exaggerated details of the infiltration. He carefully steered clear of all mention of Neville, but he had plenty of stuff to work with. Surprisingly, a lot of his audience wanted details on what Malfoy Manor had really looked like. Someone even asked if the walls were made of pure gold.

Shaking his head, Charlie made his way toward Neville's room. Bill fell into step beside him. Charlie knew he couldn't put him off, so he led his older brother to his office and activated the strong privacy wards that surrounded the room.

"Harry is getting help, Bill. There's not much I can tell you without breaching his privacy."

"I could feel the magic, Charlie. It was Dark magic, the same that was found at the Dursleys and St
"Mungo's."

"Why do you want to know?" Charlie asked, voice hard, his hands pressed flat to his desk. He couldn't be a brother right now, instead he had to be one of the leaders of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Look, I care about Harry. I do. But are we in danger?" Bill demanded.

"It's being handled."

"I saw the corpses left behind at the Dursleys. I saw what was done to Lockhart, those two patients, and the Aurors."

"And it's being handled. Did he kill anyone today?"

Bill frowned. "He left a hole in Lestrange's chest."

Charlie gave his brother a cool glare. "Did he kill anyone who wasn't actively trying to kill him."

"No," Bill answered stiffly.

Charlie nodded, making it clear that was all he was going to say on the matter.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Bill muttered and left the office, shutting the door hard on his way out.

Sighing, Charlie sat back in his chair, tiredly undoing his hair and rubbing at his eyes with one hand while activating his communication crystal with the other. The orb slowly began to pulse, light swirling in its depths.

"Minerva, here," came the Headmistress's tired voice.

"Kingsley," a deeper voice echoed the first.

"I need to transfer copies of my memories. Are you prepared?" His partners would need at least half-an-hour free to recover and view what he had to send.

"I'm clear," Kingsley answered.

"I am as well. I'll miss lunch, but I'm sure the students will cope. It's Monday, after all. They might not even notice my absence," Minerva remarked wryly.

Without further delay, Charlie concentrated and put both hands on the crystal orb. He left nothing out. By the time he was finished, sweat was dripping down his face and he felt utterly exhausted. He had no idea what they were going to do with Neville or Harry at this point. Neither of the teens were really controllable. Harry, especially, couldn't flake out in the middle of battle.

"Let me think about this. I'll get back to you tonight," Kingsley finally spoke up, his voice grim.

"Do you have any idea where Harry and Draco may have gone?" Minerva asked, worried.

"None, and I think you both know the futility of trying to search. We've never been able to find Harry before when he went missing. He'll probably return on his own shortly."

"True," Minerva said with a sigh.

"This is not acceptable," Kingsley stated, and neither Charlie or Minerva could really refute that. "I'll
"check back again at midnight."

"Agreed, and I want a full report on Neville, both his condition and a debriefing," Minerva added.

"Agreed," Charlie finalized. "Talk to you then."

xXx

Remus stood beside Neville. The tall teen lay on his back in bed while the mediwitch cast diagnostic spell after specialized diagnostic spell. He couldn't help but notice how much thinner Neville was. It was especially clear in his face and wrists. They both looked so fragile. He thought again about the way Neville had defended Rodolphus Lestrange of all people and felt sick trying to imagine what the Death Eaters had done to his cub to make Neville think the man was his friend.

"How is my grandson?" Augusta asked, voice level and expression blank as she regarded the plump witch.

"He is… fine," Gladys reported, blinking in surprise. "I don't know what to say except it seems he's already been completely healed. There is evidence of pretty powerful healing magic around him, so there’s nothing physically wrong with him except for being underweight. There aren't even the minor physical imperfections that everyone possesses. His organs, muscles, vascular, and circulatory systems are all in perfect condition. But I doubt he's okay."

Augusta crossed her arms. "What does that mean?"

Remus met her eyes steadily. "It means that Neville will most likely still feel extremely anxious and fearful even though he is now free. His first emotional reaction to things is going to be fear for a while. He'll most likely have trust issues as well. It seems that the Death Eaters played some serious psychological games with him, trying to make him think they were the good guys and we were the bad guys. He's going to be messed up, but we'll get him through it. He's very strong."

Gladys lifted her eyebrows in surprise at the man. "Yes. That's exactly right, Mr. Lupin."

"I studied a bit of psychology," Remus explained with a small smile.

"Of course we will help him," Augusta murmured. "I should take him home for some peace and quiet."

Remus was about to agree to that wholeheartedly when the door opened and Charlie slipped into the room. The werewolf tensed and stepped closer to Neville, an almost inaudible growl rising in his throat. He knew what Charlie was here for and he didn't like it one bit.

"Pritchard is in need of some assistance," Charlie said softly, pretending he didn't see the forbidding expression.

"Very well, but I will remain in the room. If I feel he is being overtaxed, you will cease," Augusta relented.
Remus wasn't as accepting. He glared at the young Order leader, his hands clenched into fists. However, he knew he had no say in the matter. He may love Neville as his own son, but he wasn't. He had no legal authority over the teen and Augusta had just given her permission. Reluctantly, he lowered his eyes and let Charlie step closer.

The redhead cast Enervate quickly and Neville opened his eyes with a loud gasp and sat bolt-upright, panicked.

"You're safe. We have you," Remus murmured, crouching down so that he was closer to Neville and less threatening at the same time.

Neville relaxed as soon as he realized his mentor was there. He held out a shaking hand and smiled when it was immediately grasped in Remus's warm grip. "I thought it was a dream."

"It's not. You're safe," Remus promised him.

"Neville. I need to ask you a few questions. If you feel overwhelmed, we can stop, but it's very important. Do you think you can talk to me for a bit?" Charlie asked gently, stepping forward and offering the teen a glass of summoned water.

Neville took the glass, his dark eyes wide with anxiety. His hand shook so badly that water spilled over the sides before he got it to his lips. He knew what they were going to ask him about. Taking a deep breath, the Gryffindor nodded. "O-okay."

Charlie pulled up a chair and sat in it, facing the distraught teen. "Can you tell me what happened to you?"

"Malfoy… He took me from school. I think Carrow h-helped." Neville's hands twisted around each other and he hurriedly explained his accusation when he saw his grandmother frown. "I felt someone following me around. I th-think it was her. Someone came to my dorm room and… and took me."

"Go on," Charlie encouraged. "I believe you. What happened next?"

"I… I woke up in a cell made of ice. I…" Neville swallowed, closing his eyes.

Instantly he was back there. Back in that awful place as if he'd never left. The chill was pressing against him, slowly seeping into his bones until he was shivering and shaking, his muscles spasming from their forced upright position. He smelled of fear and sweat, but worse he smelled of his own urine and feces. Sometimes someone would come into clean him up, but often they just left him hanging there like that. They laughed at him and made him feel so humiliated. It was almost worse than when Malfoy came in and made him so sick with all the Dark spells that he begged to be killed just for relief.

"Neville!"

He blinked and found himself on a warm bed. Remus had his face so close he could smell the werewolf's spicy scent. Tears burned his eyes in utter desperation that this be real, that he wouldn't have to go back to that cell ever again.

"Stay with me, Nev. You're safe. You're not back there," Remus promised, pressing their foreheads together.

"Don't let me go?" he pleaded softly.

Remus's eyes flashed gold. "Never, cub. Never."
Neville laughed tearfully, sobs clawing up his throat almost faster than he could swallow them down.

"Neville. Can you tell me a bit more? Did they ask you questions?" Charlie pressed gently.

"Yes. They asked me about Harry. All about Harry." His eyes flared. "But I didn't tell them anything! I swear I didn't!" It had been beyond horrible. For Malfoy to promise that it would stop if only he told them a few simple things. The answers wanted to fly from his lips, but he had held them back, sometimes screaming mindlessly as loud as he could just to stop from saying anything. He knew if he answered the little, innocent questions, he'd soon answer the bigger ones, so he had sworn to himself he'd never answer any of Malfoy's questions at all.

"I believe you," Charlie soothed. "But what kind of things did they ask?"

Suddenly, Neville clammed up. He felt on edge and vulnerable. All his memories of the relentless interrogations were fresh and alive, squirming like foul worms in his mind. He wouldn't answer any questions pertaining to his brother. Not any!

Charlie saw the way the brown eyes shuttered and closed off. He was actually encouraged by this. If Neville was in the habit of being silent when pressed, his claims of remaining silent while with the Death Eaters became all the more believable. "Neville, did they ever ask about the Order?"

The teen blinked and considered if this was okay to answer. After a long moment, he decided that it was. "No. They didn't ask about the Order. Just about Harry and my Earth magic." He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, suddenly feeling a wave of dread. "What h-happened? How did you find me? Why was the manor blown up?"

"We recognized the unhealthy plants in the area might indicate you were being held there and received a good tip saying just that," Remus answered, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry we didn't find you sooner."

"But wh-what…"

Charlie cut him off. "I want you to tell me about Rodolphus, Neville. Can you do that?"

The teen blinked, sidetracked. "Um… He…" Neville looked up at his grandmother worriedly, but she gave no sign of displeasure so he continued. "He h-helped me. He'd…" Tears burned his eyes and fell down his gaunt face. "He'd clean me up and get M-Malfoy to st-stop sometimes." Suddenly the words were pouring out in a furious torrent. "He was my friend! He didn't want to be a Death Eater anymore! They were going to torture him because he was helping me! He promised to help me escape, even if it got him killed because he didn't want them to hu-hurt me anymore! And you killed him! You KILLED HIM!"

"He tortured your parents," Augusta said coldly.

"He didn't want to! He tried to stop her!" Neville screamed, hysterical. He struggled to get out of bed, but Remus held him in place. "He loved me! You don't understand! YOU WEREN'T THERE!"

"Neville. Maybe you're right. We'll never know," Charlie interrupted, talking loudly over the teen's heavy breathing and loud sobs. Remus was practically curled around him, rocking him back and forth. "Did he ever ask you about Harry? Did you talk to him?"

Neville glared so fiercely over Remus's shoulder that if looks could kill Charlie would have fallen dead. "I didn't talk about Harry to anyone, but if I did, Rodolphus wouldn't have told. He wouldn't have betrayed me."
"Did you talk to him?" Charlie asked again, unrelenting.

"Yes. He's my friend. He was the only one who cared about me. Of course I talked to him!"

"What about?"

"He talked to me about lots of stuff. He'd listen to me," Neville rasped, voice raw. "Not many people do that. Listen. I told him about my life and he actually c-cared."

"So you told him about your magic?"

"Yes, but I didn't talk about Harry. He never asked about him. He wasn't like that! He just wanted to know about me because... because..." Neville tried to grasp at a reason why Rodolphus would want to talk to him, why he would care, but he came up empty. This enraged him further. Rodolphus wasn't the bad person everyone thought he was, and it infuriated him that they couldn't accept that. Snape had turned good, after all. So had Regulus, Sirius's brother. Why couldn't Rodolphus? "Shut up about him! Just SHUT UP!"

"I think that's enough." Augusta stepped forward, blocking Charlie's view of her grandson. "He's obviously distraught and confused. He needs rest."

"I'm not confused," Neville spat, fingers fisted in the sheets. The only thing keeping him from attacking her with his bare hands was Remus's strong arms wrapped around him.

Augusta ignored his outburst. "I'll be taking him home now."

"Eat first, at least," Charlie relented. "I won't ask anything more for now. We'll get a good meal into him before you go."

Augusta nodded. "Very well." She looked down at Neville. "I'll be back with some food."

As soon as she and Charlie were gone, Neville's anger snapped like dry twigs and left him feeling so overwhelmed and upset that he immediately began crying again. Remus said nothing, even though Neville felt pretty embarrassed and ashamed among a hundred other awful things. Remus just rubbed his back and murmured reassuring words in his ear.

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Seraphim opened his eyes. They were in their nest, their home. He'd passed out from exhaustion as soon as they'd arrived. Afternoon sunlight flooded through the west windows. Hours had passed since the shadows had brought them here. He turned hurriedly to Draco, worried his mate was already dead, that he was too late.

The blond lay next to him. His legs were crushed and blood was pooled alarmingly around them, but he was still breathing, though unconscious. Seraphim scrambled to his side and laid his hands gently on the fragile chest. He summoned the White magic. It filled him completely and he closed his eyes as the warmth spilled over and through him.

After a minute, the magic slowed to a stop and he opened his eyes to see his mate whole and well. Touching his cheek once more, he stood and paced the house. The empty rooms were familiar and safe. He smiled, pleased. He needed to get food and maybe some more blankets. It still got cold at night, but before any of that, he needed to get the pack all together. He was done with this running after pack members when they were in trouble. He was going to keep them close from now on and make sure nothing happened to them.
He checked on Draco. The blond was still out cold from the trauma. Covering him with a blanket, Seraphim nodded, satisfied. He'd only be gone a moment. Nodding again, he braced himself and allowed the shadows in the corners to race toward him. He felt the darkness wrap around him and then it was only a matter of thinking of where he wanted to go. Shadows, darkness, existed everywhere. It was a simple thing stepping from one shadow into another.

Looking around he found himself in a small stone room. There were bookshelves across from him, a door to the right, and a desk to the left. Beside him was a couch and he smiled when he saw his little fledgling staring up at him guardedly.

"Come," he said, gesturing her over and sending a greeting pulse through her feather.

Her expression cleared and lit with childlike joy. "Angel!" She jumped from the couch and rushed into his legs, wrapping her arms around his upper thighs in a tight hug.

Seraphim flinched, his skin crawling under the contact. When he was in his other form, the memories were far away, but now the phantom pains were back. He pushed her away, but he maintained a grip on her arm. He stepped backward into shadow, pulling her with him. She squealed happily when she saw the house, but her shout turned to worry when she saw Draco.

"Watch him," Seraphim ordered.

"Are you coming back?" the girl asked, looking up at him with big amber eyes.

"Yes," Seraphim answered and disappeared again.

He stepped out from another corner to find the brown-haired teen sitting in a bed with a man who was familiar and smelled of rabid wolf. Seraphim snarled at him in warning, crouching and steadying his mental grip on the Black. He was further startled when alarms began to blare.

Heart pounding, he ran forward and leapt onto the bed, landing in the teen's lap. He hunched down, lashing out with just his hand, slapping the rabid wolf away from them as the shadows converged, taking them away from all the noise.

Draco rolled onto his side, panting as he curled around his stomach. Little shocks and zaps of energy sparked along his muscles making him twitch and wheeze. It didn't hurt, exactly. In fact, it felt kind of good, but it still had his eyes watering and his lungs shuddering lightly with every breath.

Very carefully, he uncurled to find Marissa staring at him. The little girl had her knees drawn up to her chest, but as soon as she saw his eyes, she smiled. He pushed up with one hand, forcing himself to sit. A deep, gentle shiver passed through him as he moved, making him semi-hard. His eyes widened as he recognized the after-effects of a serious dose of Seraphim's White magic.

Draco looked around wildly and realized he was in the Muggle house, another clue that he was still dealing with Seraphim, but there was no sign of the alter otherwise. He was just about to ask Marissa what was happening when the shadows in the corner of the room drew together, impossibly deep and dark.

"Seph! What…?"

Draco fell silent as the alter pulled Neville through the shadow after him. He hardly noticed as the Gryffindor stumbled to his knees because Seraphim was gloriously and completely naked. The blond's mouth fell open in shock. He finally pulled his eyes away when Neville became violently
sick, heaving and trembling. By the time Draco got to the Gryffindor's side, Seraphim was gone again and Neville was unconscious. Draco eased the teen over to the corner with the blankets. A quick spell later, the smell of vomit vanished.

Marissa giggled at his disgusted expression.

He stuck his tongue out at her but then sobered. He had no idea what was happening. "Do you know what's going on?" he asked, hoping she had answers.

"Angel's back!" she cried happily.

Draco sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yes. I see that."

He was about to say something else when the corner darkened again. Seraphim stepped into the room, shoving Severus away from him as soon as he could. His expression echoed Draco's disgust from earlier as he rubbed his hands up and down his arms afterward. The Potions Master stumbled before catching his footing, and Draco's eyes widened when he took in Severus's furious glare. This wasn't good.

"Uh… Seph…"

"You insufferable, arrogant, moronic brat," Severus snarled in a dark, vicious voice. He stepped toward the naked teen, threat clear in his posture and expression.

"Um… Severus…" Draco almost squeaked.

Seraphim lashed out with both his hands. Draco gasped in utter terror, thinking he was about to see his teacher murdered before his eyes. He couldn't even fathom what damage that would do to Shadow, to know that he'd killed his own father. He reached forward, calling out, but he couldn't move faster than Seraphim's spell. Severus flew across the room, skid along the bare floor, and was held down by ropes of writhing shadows. Draco almost fainted in relief when the man began cussing up a storm.

The alter stalked forward, hands up before him, fingers curled almost like claws. "Poisoned. Marked by another pack," Seraphim growled as he approached the man. "I can feel it; almost Black." He crouched and ripped the man's sleeve away, eyes riveted on the Dark Mark. The tattoo seemed almost alive, the snake twisting and writhing on Severus arm, the skull swollen and irritated.

Draco felt sick looking at it. He reached for Marissa and tucked her head into his side. "Don't look."

The four-year-old didn't argue for once and held to him tightly.

"Who do you belong to?" Seraphim asked lowly, raising his eyes to stare into Severus's hate-filled ones.

Sanity flickered for an instant across Severus's face. From deep inside where he kept his true self, he understood that this was important and allowed some of his fake persona to fray and dissolve. It left himself open to attack, but he saw no other way. His foul invectives died on his lips and he coughed, reflexively tugging at his restraints. Coughing again, he answered honestly, "You. I belong to you."

Seraphim grinned a feral grin and stabbed his hand down, grasping Severus's arm, his thumb digging into the man's Dark Mark.

Severus arched, feeling as if his very being were being torn in two. Pain like he'd never known flared inside him, almost burning him up into a cinder in the process. Then as quickly as the mind-
shattering agony began, it was gone, leaving him weak and sobbing in reaction, curled in a tight ball in the middle of the floor.

Seraphim scrambled away, out of reach.

"Seph, why did you bring them?" Draco asked numbly. He had no idea what the alter had done, but if his suspicions were correct, then he'd just witnessed the impossible.

"Did you save him, Angel?" Marissa asked, looking up at her savior with a pale face. Severus's screams of agony had shaken her.

"Yes. Saved him." Seraphim's eyes drifted to Neville who was vomiting even as he lay unconscious. He was now choking on it. Hurrying forward, he poured White magic down into the fragile body. He growled, very annoyed. The pack was falling apart! How did the Other let things get so bad?

"Seph," Draco called even as he cast cleaning spells to help with Neville. He was worried, but also confused. He desperately needed information. "Why did you bring all of us here?"

"Keep pack safe," Seraphim answered. He sat back on his haunches and brushed the dark wavy hair from his eyes. He was exhausted again and starving. "I go get food."

"Wait!" Draco quickly stopped him. "Neville," he gestured at the unconscious teen, "is allergic to the Black. It makes him sick. Don't do Black magic too close to him."

Seraphim looked startled by this revelation. The Black was there to protect them. How could it make the teen sick? But he trusted Draco, so he stood and moved toward the front door under the power of his feet. He didn't have the strength to use the shadows to travel anyway.

"Seph." Draco tried to hide his smile of amusement. "You have no clothes. Let me get the food."

Seraphim wanted to protest. It was dangerous, but... he finally nodded. It was his job to protect Draco, but as Seraphim's mate, it was Draco's job to help take care of the pack. He had to let Draco do some things on his own. "Be fast."

"I'll be quick, but before I go, can I ask why you are making Severus and Neville a part of the pack? It doesn't seem like you like it very much." When Seraphim frowned, Draco quickly added, "Not that I don't agree. They are trustworthy pack mates."

Seraphim stared first at Neville, then over at Severus. Marissa was helping the man sit up and drink a glass of water. Seraphim wrapped his arms around his chest unhappily. "Don't trust them. Don't like them. But Other wants them safe. They are Other's pack. I keep them safe and my pack safe, too."

"Okay." Draco smiled and reached out to touch Seraphim's shoulder. The alter flinched away and Draco sighed. "I'll be right back."

Seraphim nodded and hunkered down in the corner where he could keep an eye on everyone and still keep some distance between them. Marissa smiled over at him and he smiled back, very pleased with the way the little fledgling was supporting the pack.

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Voldemort glared at his servants. His thin, spidery fingers gripped the armrests of his throne so hard that the wood creaked. Lucius and Bella were in front of the crowd, abasing themselves, their noses pressed firmly to the floor as they cow-towed. The twenty-five or so Death Eaters behind them were all on one knee, their heads bowed so that not a single face could be seen. Not a few of them were
shaking with fear.

"The boy esscaped, Rodolphus'ss's programming broken before it could take hold, Malfoy Manor dessstroyed…" Voldemort's cold, sibilant voice broke off, his red eyes practically glowing with fury. He stood, evil power rising around him like black flames ready to devour any who drew his attention. "And the only Order member killed wasss killed by the boy! Sssuch failure isss unforgivable!"

"The monitoring spells did render some important information, my Lord," Lucius said softly, shivering in anticipation and dread as that cold power brushed along his senses.

"What information, dear Luciussss," Voldemort hissed softly as he came down off the small platform to stand directly in front of his favorite. His tone made it clear that Lucius had better have something good to tell him or he might become his favorite dead servant.

"Potter was a part of the rescue team, my Lord." Lucius lifted his head to look at his master with glowing, fanatical eyes. "He was in his cat form as he was in the Department of Mysteries, but he returned to his human self when he needed to do battle. My Lord, we recorded his use of the Dark power. Perhaps we can learn more about its use. Also, the Longbottom boy used his Elemental ability against the Order. Rodolphus'ss's indoctrination would have been successful if it weren't for Potter. If we capture the boy again, it would be easy to finish what was started."

Voldemort slowly smiled. His cold fingers trailed over Lucius's hair. "Very good, my Lucciussss, thiss isss newssss indeed." Without looking away he said, "Bella, I'm putting you in charge of thosssse who fought againsst the Order and did not kill even one little bird. Make them ssscream, my pet."

Bellatrix grinned happily. "Yes, my Lord." She stood and whipped her wand over her head. Thirteen Death Eaters went ridged as an invisible whip lashed at their face, blinding them with blood and making them gasp with pain. "Come, children. It's time to serve your Lord."

Trembling the men and woman came to their feet. Most had to bite their lips to prevent themselves from begging pardon or offering excuses. They knew by now that that would only earn them a worse punishment, so they obediently left the hall in front of Bellatrix, knowing there was no escaping punishment. Before Bellatrix left the hall completely, Voldemort's voice stopped her.

"And, Bella dear, I'll deal with you tonight. You alssso failed me," he promised evilly.

The mad witch actually smiled at this promise of pain. "Yes, my Lord. It will be as you wish." She bowed again and set off after the disappointing Death Eaters.

"Come, Luciussss. We have work to do," Voldemort turned and moved toward the back of the hall.

Lucius scrambled to his feet, eager to examine the spells that recorded the events at his home. He would destroy Potter if it was the last thing he ever did. He was just stepping into his Lord's private study when the tall form of the Dark Lord staggered and then collapsed. Lucius raced forward, casting diagnostic spells as he moved, but he could find nothing wrong with his Lord.

"My Lord Voldemort," Lucius said urgently. "What is it?"

The Dark Lord arched, his hands scrabbling at the floor, his face twisted in pain. Then as quickly as the attack happened, Voldemort went limp, his thin chest rising and falling rapidly.

"My Lord?"
A white hand snapped out and grabbed Lucius by the throat. Lucius froze as he was cut off from oxygen and his brain denied blood. Within seconds black began crowding in his vision, but still he didn't try and remove his Lord's grip. The last thing he saw before he passed out was Voldemort's malevolent red eyes.

"Ssseverusss," the Dark Lord snarled, enraged. He'd been enjoying their mind games, enjoyed breaking his traitorous servant down little by little and stealing information that would destroy every last thing Severus ever cared about. But now his toy was taken from him. Somehow Severus had managed to escape. It was impossible! Nothing could take a Death Eater from him except death!

Getting to his feet, hissing at the pain in his head, he flung Lucius's limp body away from him. He could hardly see straight he was so furious. Slamming the door open, he strode through the hall and toward the dungeon where Bella was beginning the punishments for the pathetic failures who bumbled so badly at Malfoy Manor.

Bella was already writhing in pain by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs as he whispered a generalized Cruciatus curse. He needed to practice if he were to find the right combination of spells for his faithless little Severus Snape. In fact, Voldemort would create a new spell just to make sure Severus suffered the full extent of the Dark Lord's wrath. He grabbed one of the fools and drug him into the center of the room.

"My Lord, please… Please, my Lord… I will do better. I won't disappoint you again!"

Voldemort smiled and slowly began to see just how much he could torture the human body before it broke completely.

Bella watched with rapt adoration. She crawled forward to press herself against her Lord's leg, letting blood bathe her body and agonized screams pleasure her soul. This was her God and he was glorious!

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Severus slowly opened his eyes. His mind was as empty the plain white ceiling. He just drifted, his five senses slowly reporting information that seemed irrelevant. In fact, he most probably would still be lost to the grip of sleep if it weren't for the rather demanding hunger rising from his center. His limbs felt shivery and weak, something he instinctively frowned at. Weakness was intolerable. He had to be ready. For what he wasn't certain, but he knew it was true nevertheless.

Toward this aim, he actually focused on the sensory input instead of letting it wash meaninglessly over him. The first thing he registered was the lighting. It was coming in through a window to his right, the pink-orange of dawn. Trying to gauge what time it was brought him a memory of a naked Harry Potter stepping out from the shadow of a massive oak, pulling him into liquid darkness.

It had been early afternoon then. Severus hoped he'd only slept through one night because he had a feeling time was of the essence. Things were happening and, blessedly, he didn't have to sit on the sidelines any longer. Immediately following this thought, his eyes dropped to his left arm.

There was no dark tattoo. Only a round, shapeless scar where the mark had been. Better yet, there was no evil presence spreading like cancer through his mind. He was free, for the first time in almost twenty years. He pulled in a breath of air, astonished. Tears burned his eyes and he almost burst into laughter, he was so shocked. Never once, not once, did he ever think this would be possible. He had accepted that he'd die as the Dark Lord's servant, although an unfaithful one, just as he accepted that the sun would rise every morning.
Sitting up, arms wrapped around his stomach to keep the joy bubbling underneath his skin from escaping, he looked around the small bare room. Furniture-less, his eyes were immediately drawn to the people occupying the small space. First under his scrutiny was Longbottom, who lay as still as death next to him. It was immediately apparent that the Gryffindor wasn't faring well. He was ghastly pale and thinner than Severus remembered.

Draco and Marissa lay sleeping amongst a pile of blankets on the other side of the room, whereas Neville and he rated only a single blanket each. In the middle, with Draco and Marissa on one side and Severus and Longbottom on the other, lay his son, curled into a defensive ball, his hands twitching and a frown disturbing his features. Severus knew the boy wasn't sleeping nearly as peacefully as Draco and Marissa, and he felt a pang, wishing his son could find rest without his past haunting him.

It took actual concentration to get his body working in sync and to get to his feet without falling. Severus felt like he'd been ill for a long time and was only now recovering. Weak didn't even begin to touch on the pervasive feeling saturating his body. Carefully, he stepped from the room, his robes, with the left sleeve still torn off, swirling around him as he moved. The familiar sensation was deeply comforting.

He found the kitchen in short order and demolished the pathetic offerings he found on the table. Artificial and preservative-filled Muggle food did not meet even his lowest standard of nutrition, but it filled him enough to go in search of real food. Stripping off his robe, he revealed a black, long-sleeved button-down and slacks. They would let him wander the neighborhood without drawing too much attention to himself.

Half an hour later, he returned with enough ingredients to make a decent stew. He was dismayed to find the house had neither electricity nor gas, but was mollified when the water worked. He filled a pot he conjured with water and began making the potato broth, spelling the water to a consistent boil. Then he set about washing, peeling, and chopping the various other vegetables. The work was very similar to potions. Soon he found himself relaxing, a sense of tranquility soothing his still rattled nerves.

"Morning, Professor."

He flicked his eyes to the entrance as Draco walked into the room, hair mussed from sleep. Severus spoke calmly. "Wash your hands and finish chopping the carrots."

Draco smiled wryly. Some things never changed.

"Where is Harry?"

"Seph, actually, and still sleeping. He woke when I did, but I told him everything was fine. He went back to sleep. He used a lot of magic yesterday and needs it."

"Tell me," Severus demanded, only a fraction of his attention on the broth he was seasoning, the rest riveted on the Slytherin.

Draco complied. He explained as best he could about the attack on Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, the fight with Lucius, Neville's kidnapping, working with the Order, and the rescue, stopping only to provide more detail when Severus interrupted with sharp questions. By the time he finished, the vegetables and spices were added and they left the pot to simmer. Severus conjured two chairs to go with the single table, and they sat together silently, lost in thought.

"Good morning!"
Marissa bounded into the room, full of energy. Seraphim trailed behind her with less. Dark circles ringed his eyes, but the emerald orbs were alert. He quickly scanned the room before relaxing. He moved to stand behind Draco's right shoulder, close to the door and escape should he need it. He kept his eyes on Severus suspiciously, but didn't seem to be hostile.

Marissa crawled into Severus lap and gave him a hug. "Are you feeling better, Sev'rus?"

"Yes. I am." He smiled down at the girl and patted her head. "Breakfast will be ready in an hour. How about some milk to hold you over?"

"Milk?" Draco asked curiously.

"I charmed the refrigerator cold." Severus smiled wryly. He conjured some glasses and poured two, handing one to Marissa and the other to Draco.

The blond took it and drank it gratefully. "But what if we're detected?"

"We should be safe as long as we only do small magics. In any case, I don't think we should stay here long," Severus answered, his dark eyes on his son. "The Black magic is very easy to follow because it is so distinct."

Seraphim curled a lip in disgust, but he said nothing.

"Where should we go then?" Draco asked anxiously. He also looked at Seraphim. The alter wouldn't feel safe in very many places and they had to be careful of who saw Harry like this.

"We would be better supplied if we had the services of an elf."

"The House?" Draco perked up. "Can you unlock it?"

"It would be taxing, but, yes, I could. I would rather leave that for a last resort, however." Severus gently set Marissa on the floor and went to check on the soup. "I was speaking of the Chamber."

Draco was surprised he hadn't thought of that himself, but he felt like they had left Hogwarts for good when they joined the Order. He nodded. "Sounds good. Why don't we go now? Why wait for soup?" he asked, gesturing at the pot. His stomach growled at the delicious aroma. "Not that I'm complaining."

"First, I need to get Longbottom well enough to Side-Along Apparate. Thus the soup. Then we'll go," Severus explained.

Draco nodded; this made sense.

"Angel come?" Marissa asked. She was bouncing on her knees, looking anxiously over at Seraphim.

"Of course," Draco reassured her. "We're not going anywhere without Seph."

The alter looked down at Draco and offered a tense smile. He looked troubled, but he hadn't spoken up against their plan.

"We want to go back to that place with the dead snake. Do you remember? Food is there and it is hidden underground away from people," Draco explained, trying to gauge how much of the conversation Seraphim had actually followed.

Severus frowned, but he could understand Seraphim's point of view. Draco and he had stayed here several times and had been safe each time. He didn't understand that this was only because they hadn't stayed for a long period. He didn't understand how hard it would be to live in such an empty house. They couldn't keep stealing food. It would get them into trouble, not to mention the Wizarding world would find them eventually by following their trail. He had no idea how to make this damaged side of his son understand these complications, either.

"Seph..." Draco tried, eyes beseeching.

"No," Seraphim answered, voice low and even. That was his final decision and he obviously expected Draco to support him.

Faced with this, Draco found he couldn't argue. Seraphim expected them to make a united front since they were both the core of the pack, the strength. Severus and Neville had been accepted, but they were still outsiders, one step removed from the intimate circle that Draco, Marissa, and Seraphim created.

Severus understood. In fact, Draco had rescued him and played interference with Seraphim more than enough. It was time for him to stand on his own. He met the alter's eyes, keeping his expression calm and non-threatening. "Seraphim. If you wish to stay here, I will do everything in my power to help you. I will search for food and help install protections around the house. However, I feel that it is my duty to keep the pack safe. This place is vulnerable because it is where you brought us after freeing me from the other pack. That pack will be looking for me and might follow us here."

Seraphim frowned. His emotions were tightly coiled. He was terrified of being hurt again, desperate to hide his pack away somewhere safe. He didn't understand and he wasn't sure if he was able to trust this man. Wasn't sure he could trust anyone ever again, except Draco and the fledgling. And this uncertainty made the anger, always simmering underneath, burn hotter. This man, who was capable of violence, as all men were, was a threat he'd always have to keep an eye on. Now the man was going to bring further enemies down on them in the form of this other pack.

Severus saw the anger come to life and knew it was the worst thing that could happen. Somehow Shadow had obviously come to a tentative understanding with the alter. If Seraphim decided to disregard Shadow's acceptance of Severus and Neville in the pack, then Shadow would be less likely to ever deal with the alter again and continue to simply suppress him as much as possible. He could tell that Seraphim was on the verge of saying to hell with Severus and the problems he brought to the pack.

Draco and Marissa watched helplessly as Seraphim and Severus seemed to hold an entire conversation that couldn't be heard as their eyes locked from across the room. Seraphim seemed to be getting progressively more angry and Severus more grave. Just when Draco got ready to say something, anything, to stall this inevitable confrontation, Severus did something that struck him mute. He sank to his knees and tilted his head submissively.

"I am sorry I put this pack in danger. I am dangerous, but if you let me, I can be dangerous to the pack's enemies as well."

Draco turned wide eyes to Seraphim to see how he would react.

Seraphim wrapped his arms around his chest, immediately missing his jacket, as his breath came in quick gasps. Seraphim couldn't take his eyes off the pale, exposed throat. With no outlet for his anger, no source to feed it and keep it growing, he swung straight back into fear. Severus was part of
the pack; he had submitted. He couldn't hurt him. It was his job to protect him, but how could he do that when he didn't understand? This place that was safe, wasn't safe? The place filled with humans and where Neville was stolen away to be hurt, that place was safe? Another pack was coming after them? He didn't know what to do and that terrified him. Hyperventilating, he backed to the door, shaking his head mutely.

Draco reached for him, but Seraphim flinched, uttering a low cry before turning and fleeing the room.

"Don't. He just needs a moment to recover," Severus called, halting Draco from going after the alter. He got to his feet and frowned as he realized Marissa was crying silently, her hands covering her face. "Marissa. What is wrong?"

Draco turned and looked at the child. He hurried forward, pulling her into his lap. "Marissa, sweetie, why are you crying?"

The little girl buried her face into his shoulder and clung to his neck. "Angel is s-s-scared! Are we in tr-tr-trouble? Are bad people coming to g-g-get us?" she stuttered fearfully. She couldn't imagine anything making the powerful Angel afraid, but it must be horrible.

"No. We're going to be just fine. We're going to take care of each other," Draco reassured her, running a hand through her copper curls. "Seraphim is just realizing how much he loves us. It's a scary thing because if something were to happen, he'd be very sad."

Marissa sniffed and looked up at him. She rubbed at her nose, her eyes red. "Sometimes… Sometimes I think of before. I get scared that maybe I'll have to leave you and Angel and Sirius and Sev, and I'll go back to my p-p-parents. Is it like that?"

"Exactly like that." Draco smiled at her. "And don't forget Shadow. You'd miss him, too, right?"

"No," she answered, scrunching her face. "Shadow's a big meanie!"

Severus lifted an eyebrow at that and conjured some bowls. He carefully ladled out five.

Draco didn't look as surprised, merely resigned. "Since when?"

"He doesn't like Angel!" Marissa exclaimed. "And he doesn't like to play with me anymore."

"He's just very busy," Draco said a bit desperately. "And he doesn't like to go away, even if it is for Angel."

"Eat your breakfast," Severus interrupted. The girl would have to come to terms with her feelings about Shadow on her own. Nothing Draco could say would sway her. "Draco, go and fetch Neville."

The blond carefully set Marissa onto the seat under him and went to find the Gryffindor, grateful for the reprieve. It bothered him that Marissa, who had become like a little sister to him, would be so strongly against Shadow. The girl just couldn't be made to understand that Seraphim and Shadow were actually the same person. Hopefully in time understanding would come.

He found Seraphim curled up in the corner of the bedroom. He was holding his legs and shuddering every few seconds, his green eyes wide still with fear. Draco tried to ignore it and concentrate on Neville, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't see Seraphim suffering and do nothing. Carefully, he crept forward, stopping three feet away when Seraphim tensed.
"Seph, don't be afraid. We're strong. We'll be able to protect ourselves. You have me, you know. I won't let anything happen to you," he promised, knowing even as he said it that it wasn't true. Sometimes things were out of your control, but he'd do as much as humanly possible to make it true.

Seraphim looked deeply into Draco's eyes and must have found what he was looking for. He relaxed, his legs falling away as he brought his hands to his face and sobbed.

It took everything Draco had not to move forward and wrap his arms around his love, but he knew very well that Seraphim, without the Animagus transformation heightening his instincts and softening his memories, would not appreciate being touched. So he sat there instead, offering his presence as the only comfort he could.

Severus came into the room a moment later, looking to see why Draco hadn't returned. His heart ached at the state his son was in, but he wisely ignored it and got Neville sitting up. It took some coaxing, but he eventually had the Gryffindor standing and moving under his own power to the kitchen.

Draco waited for them to leave before scooting closer to Seraphim and leaning against the wall next to him. "Are you okay?"

"Scared," the teen answered, green eyes resting on Draco's face trustingly. "Don't want to be hurt no more."

"You've only been hurt when you've been alone. We'll just have to stick together from now on."

Seraphim smiled and wiped at his wet cheeks. He nodded and reached a trembling hand forward to rest on Draco's wrist briefly before pulling it back into his personal space.

Draco grinned at him, almost bursting with pride at that small gesture and making Seraphim blush. "Come on. I know you must be hungry. Come eat with me. Severus made a very good soup. We'll talk about where we're going to go after that, okay?"

Seraphim nodded and stood. They were almost to the kitchen when he asked, "Where's the jacket?"

"Back at the Chamber," Draco answered, looking over his shoulder at his lover. He hid a smile when he noticed the thoughtful expression cross the alter's face, but he didn't push it.

They entered the kitchen to find Marissa almost done with her bowl of soup and chatting happily at Severus about her games with Sirius. Neville blinked dully as he slowly spooned liquid into his mouth, and Severus watched him out of the corner of his eye while pretending to listen to the hyper four-year-old.

Draco took the seat next to Neville, across from Marissa, leaving the side closest to the door open for Seraphim to sit alone. Severus nodded as he sat across from Seph, but other than that didn't give him a second glance. This allowed Seraphim to relax and actually enjoy the meal while Draco and Marissa bantered across the table and Neville slowly came awake. It wasn't until everyone finished eating that Seraphim spoke.

"Place with snake not safe," he stated, glancing at Draco. "But this place not safe either."

"We could look for a new place…" Draco trailed off uncertainly. He looked to Severus for guidance.

"I have my camping equipment. It could hold all of us temporarily," Severus finally offered.

Draco understood what he left unsaid. That he hoped Shadow would return to them soon. He
nodded. "Sounds like a good plan. What do you think, Seph?"

"Camping?" the alter asked, a frown tugging down his full lips.

"In a tent, in the woods. Away from people," Draco explained.

"What about food?" Seraphim surprisingly looked to Severus to answer this question.

"I will take you to my camp and then I will fetch some supplies."

Seraphim narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "I go with you."

Severus bowed his head acceptingly. "If that is what you want. But the others…"

"Draco protect them."

The blond blinked in surprise at this display of trust from the damaged alter. Warmth spread through his chest. "I'll make sure nothing happens," he promised.

"Very well. Everyone grab hold of me." Severus examined Neville's drawn face. "Hold especially tight, Longbottom. We wouldn't want to leave half of you here."

Marissa giggled and wrapped her arm around the Potions Master's leg. Neville grasped his forearm, Severus holding just as tightly to the teen's as he reciprocated the hold. Draco came around the table and gripped Severus's shoulder, his grey eyes turning to Seraphim questioningly when the alter didn't come forward.

"I follow with shadow," Seraphim said softly, his arms tight around his chest, fear shimmering across his face.

"Black magic can be followed. That's why we have to leave here," Severus reminded patiently. "It will be quick. Please, Seraphim."

The alter grimaced, but shuffled forward a few steps. Draco reached for him and Seraphim flinched before bringing up his hand to clasp the blond's. Draco frowned when he felt the steady shivers running through his friend's muscles. Quickly, he tugged Seraphim forward and trapped the trembling hand under his own on Severus's shoulder.

A loud crack and a whirling sensation. Seraphim cried out in fear and yanked away. He tripped over an exposed tree root and fell backward on his butt, panting and twitching as he rocked himself.

Severus lifted Neville into his arms and carried him inside the tent. He laid the unconscious Gryffindor on the couch and turned to find Marissa exploring the place. He caught her arm gently and knelt so he could look her in the eye.

"You may play in here if you don't break anything. If you go outside, stay within sight of Draco at all times. If you cannot see him, you've gone too far. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sev'rus," Marissa replied sweetly.

Severus wasn't fooled. "When I return, if I've found you broken these rules, I will not be pleased. Do you understand that?"

Marissa's eyes widened and nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll be back shortly. Be good, Marissa. Things are dangerous right now and I'm counting on
you to help me."
The little girl nodded, smiling. "I'll be very good."

Severus nodded and left her exploring the fireplace. He found Draco crouched by the still distraught alter and he cleared his throat. The blond looked up at him and nodded when he indicated that he was leaving and would be back soon. He walked a few feet away and disappeared with a soft crack.

Draco continued to murmur soothingly and was pleased when Seraphim slowly began to calm. "That's it. You're all right. No one is hurting you. You're safe."

"I was so hungry," Seraphim whispered, his green eyes coming up and capturing Draco's. "Potato skin was sitting in the trash. I… I took it. Uncle was so angry." His voice lowered, roughened as he mimicked Vernon's fury. "You filthy ingrate! After all we've done for you! Our trash is too good for a bastard like you!" Seraphim shuddered as tears rolled down his cheeks. His eyes beseeched Draco to understand the pain, to somehow make it stop. "Uncle made me give it back, shoved his fingers down my throat. Then he said, 'You still hungry, Boy? Have at it.'"

"Seraphim," Draco groaned. He knew bad things happened to Boy to make him the way he was, but hearing the details somehow made it more real for him.

"I had to lick it up. It burned and came back up again." The alter flinched, remembering that moment as if it happened yesterday. He ducked his head, hiding behind his dark, wavy bangs. "I'm sorry. Sorry, Uncle…" Crying now, Seraphim shook his head. "He stomped on me. Stomped again and again. Hurt. Hurt so much. Couldn't breathe. Blood. Blood filled my mouth, couldn't breathe. So scared. I was so scared, Draco."

"I know," Draco rasped, hoarse. Tears filled his own eyes as he listened to the anguished story.

"He put me back in the cupboard. Where bad boys live. Its so dark in there, and it hurts hurts. Uncle bangs on the door to shut the Boy up." Seraphim's breathing quickened and his eyes began to glow as he looked over his crossed arms, propped on his knees. "But I shut him up. He'll never hurt Boy again. Never! I killed him! Killed him dead!"

"Seraphim!" Draco called, afraid of where this was going. "It's over. He's gone, just like you said. You're safe here. It's over."

As quickly as the anger came, it swung just as quickly back to grief. "It's never over," Seraphim answered brokenly, exhausted. He turned his back on Draco and buried his head against his arms as he wept.

Draco ached to hold him, to prove that it was over, that he didn't have to be afraid anymore of the next punishment, but he couldn't. Seraphim quite literally couldn't comprehend that. Even though he was the one to kill Vernon and Petunia, Seraphim still deep down feared that they were coming to get him.

"Draco…"

He turned and saw Marissa standing there, looking upset. "What is it, sweetie?" he asked, pulling her into his arms and standing.

"Everyone is crying," she whispered, tears of her own sliding down her cheeks.

Draco winced. This couldn't be a good environment for a little kid. "You mean Neville and Seph? They were hurt and sometimes they remember bad things. They'll feel better in a few minutes. Why
don't we walk around and see if we can find any treasures."

It wasn't until he broke clear of the trees ten minutes later that he realized where they were. Malfoy manor lay in ruins in the valley below them. Over half of the walls had collapsed, leaving only a few rooms toward the back of the manor intact. A sharp memory of his mother hit him then. He'd almost had Lucius at Hogwarts. The rage he kept buried came roaring to the surface. He had a sudden urge to run down there to finish the job and demolish the manor below them, eradicate it completely.

"What happened to that house, Draco?" the little girl asked innocently.

"Justice." His voice was cold, his face hard as ice.

Marissa stared up at him, her expression wary.

It was almost painful, pushing the need to avenge his mother down and soften his voice. Draco grabbed her hand and turned them back toward the tent. "We shouldn't stay near here. It might be dangerous. Let's go back and show Seraphim the treasures you found."

Marissa grinned brightly, worry forgotten, and clutched the pretty leaf and rock she'd found while they walked. "Okay!"

Draco followed feeling numb. When they reached the tent, they found Severus was back. Seraphim was sitting on the floor, happily wearing jeans and the activated black, straight-jacket, his arms wrapped around him in the long sleeves. Draco lifted and eyebrow at Severus, knowing the man had fetched it from the Chamber, along with the food supplies, but Severus merely shrugged.

The four of them settled down for the day. Draco played quiet games with Marissa while Neville locked himself in the bedroom. Severus appeared to be writing lists in a black, leather bound book, and Seraphim watched over them all silently in his corner by the fire. At least he was no longer crying. Draco was just happy he wasn't crying.

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Shadow slowly opened his eyes. It felt like he was trying to break through the surface of a swamp. Lethargically, he tilted his head, trying to blink the blurry scene into focus. It was no good, but he was pretty sure he didn't recognize the place he was in. He was sitting on the floor, his back to a corner, but he could make out white carpet and cream walls.

A couch sat a few feet away with black pillows on it. A stone fireplace was to his right with a warm fire crackling peacefully. Shadow was sweating in the jacket he wore, but when he moved to take it off, he realized it was his straight jacket and his arms were pinned around him.

It was then that he remembered. Malfoy Manor, Neville's madness… He remembered the pain as vines burrowed through his skin and the utter certainty that he was going to lose his brother. Desperate, he did something that he swore he'd never do. He willingly gave up control; he dove down inside his mind and reached for his insane alter.

The dreams of the past week had given him a new perspective. He could almost understand what Seraphim wanted and it wasn’t so bad. He wanted safety. He'd even be pitiful if it weren't for Seraphim's sheer power; power that could help Shadow if he trusted just a little bit.

Shadow knew he couldn't trust Seraphim to be reasonable, sane, or even controllable, really, but he could trust Seraphim to protect those who belonged to him and could trust the alter to survive where Shadow would not. Shadow somehow made it clear that if Seraphim would protect those that Shadow loved, then he wouldn't be so ruthlessly suppressed. Maybe, just maybe, they could come to
some sort of understanding.

Shadow would never accept Seraphim and Seraphim would never be able to trust that Shadow would protect them the way Seraphim would, but maybe they could work together to their mutual benefit. Now all he had to do was find out if he had made a deal with the devil. He was afraid to learn that he'd made a terrible mistake.

Whispering the phrase that released his arms and returned his jacket to normal, Shadow sat forward and squinted hard. He tensed when he realized that someone was laying in front of the fire, wrapped in a blanket, but then relaxed when a shock of white blond hair told him it was Draco. Crawling forward, Shadow grabbed his lover by the shoulder.

Draco sat up, clutching his wand. "Harry!" he cried when he saw he was no longer dealing with Seph. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shadow responded with a wry smile. He'd forgotten he still looked like Harry Potter and the knowledge that he did made a subtle shift in his thinking. Shaking his head, he focused on what was important. "What happened? Where are my glasses? My wand? Where are we?"

"Bloody hell," Draco breathed, his eyes wide in horror. "I didn't even think about that."

"What?" Harry demanded sharply.

"Your wand and glasses… They must be at the manor still. Seraphim doesn't need them. We must have left them behind."

Harry frowned. It wasn't like Draco to miss such a detail. "Why didn't you grab them?"

"I wasn't in any shape to be grabbing anything," Draco admitted reluctantly, his voice hard. He was still ashamed of his inability to help at the manor. Harry would have died if Seraphim hadn't come Out. "Last thing I remember is Seraphim launching himself at Neville, then the whole manor fell on our heads. I lost consciousness. When I came to, I was in the Muggle house that Seraphim has claimed, the one where he found Marissa."

"He also collected Neville, Marissa, and I. Supposedly, we make up his pack now," a dark voice added.

Harry's head shot up, his hand unknowingly clamping hard around Draco's shoulder. "Dad?"

"After Draco told me the story of the raid on Malfoy Manor, I returned and fetched your things."

Severus uncurled from his uncomfortable position on the couch and stood. His back popped loudly and he grimaced.

"But… Voldemort…" Harry spluttered, shocked.

"Seraphim also rid me of my mark. Voldemort," he drawled with pleasure, the name no longer bringing him pain, "holds no claim on my body or my mind." He reached forward and carefully hooked the round glasses over his son's ears.

Harry blinked as the room and faces came into sharp focus. He stared almost hungrily at his father.

Severus knelt and pulled him into a loose hug. "I am sorry, Shadow. I promised to stand beside you, and I was unable to keep that promise."

"Doesn't matter. You're here now," Harry answered roughly, his hands clasping the back of
Severus's robes. "You are, right? You're staying?"

Severus nodded. "I am."

"Good." Harry closed his eyes tight and just breathed in his father's scent. "My wand?" he asked eventually as he pulled away.

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out the ashwood wand.

Harry took it, feeling the warm rush of magic that belonged only to him. He smiled and bowed his head. "Thank you."

Severus waved the gratitude away with a familiar gesture. To change the subject, he looked to the smirking blond standing beside them. "Make yourself useful and help me up," he growled.

Draco immediately reached out and helped Severus to his feet. The older man made no sound of pain, but he limped heavily back over to the couch and sat down, his long-fingered hand massaging his right thigh and knee.

Harry frowned at this reminder of his father's injury at Dumbledore's hand, but he said nothing, knowing Severus's pride would translate any compassion or worry into pity. Instead, he focused on what he'd missed. "Tell me what happened. Everything," he ordered, standing and pushing his glasses further up his nose. He pinned both Severus and Draco with his intense green eyes.

Draco dutifully described everything that he knew in as much detail as he could. Severus added what he witnessed where it was pertinent. Unsurprisingly, when they both fell silent, Harry’s first concern was Neville.

"How is he?"

"He endured a very trying experience," Severus explained gently. "It will take time before he feels well again."

"I'm going to go talk to him," Harry decided. He turned and squeezed Draco's hand before he passed. The bedroom door wasn't locked. He pushed it open and found Neville sitting on the edge of the bed staring at the wall. Marissa was just sitting up, rubbing her eyes sleepily. They had apparently shared the bed.

"Hey. Draco and Severus are making breakfast. Why don't you see if you can help them?"

Marissa's smile slowly faded. "Where's Angel?"

"He went back to sleep."

"Why does he have to go away all the time?" she demanded, glaring.

"Because…" Harry shrugged. He didn't really have a clear answer for her. "Go see Draco," he said again, feeling uncomfortable. He sighed as the little girl shoved passed him unhappily, but he couldn't do anything for her right now. He shut the door and stepped closer to his brother. "Nev? You okay?"

"I killed people…" the thinner Gryffindor stated. His voice was monotone and empty, as were his eyes.

Harry sat next to him and said nothing, just waited to give whatever was needed.
"I don't really remember what happened after Rodolphus helped me escape. It's like a bad dream. I was so empty… Then the Earth was back. It was almost like that time I almost got lost in Earth with Rowena." He shook his head, his hands clenching on his knees. "The m-m-manor was such a small place, with insignificant people scrambling around. I had to get out, that's all that mattered. I was just trying to get out."

"I understand," Harry whispered as his brother's emotions filled his senses. It was very familiar. A horrible self-awareness, self-denial, confusion… He'd felt all those things about Seraphim when he'd come back from killing the Dursleys that summer.

"No, you don't!" Neville screamed furiously. He jumped to his feet and glared down at his brother. "You don't understand anything! They were torturing me and I just wanted it to stop! Earth magic is about LIFE and they made me KILL with it." He sunk to his knees, his hands shaking as they covered his face. "I killed them… I killed them."

Harry slipped off the bed to kneel before him. He pulled him firmly forward and hugged him close. "I do understand, Nev. I'm so sorry I didn't get you out of there sooner." Closing his eyes, he just held on as Neville began to sob. "Do you remember what you said to me once. 'This didn't happen because of you, it happened to you.' We'll get through this. We'll make sure this can't happen again, or at least not without your full control. Your magic isn't tainted, Neville. Earth magic is about life, but it is also about death. Nature is a balance of both. There's nothing evil or wrong about it. What happened was a horrible thing, but it wasn't your fault. It was the Death Eaters."

"I killed them," Neville repeated numbly, shaking his head.

Despair slid through Harry’s veins until it pushed everything else out. They sat there, numb to the world, lost in their pain, until a hand descended on Harry’s shoulder. Bleakly, his dull green eyes lifted to find Draco standing above him, a frown on his face. He said something, but Harry didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. Pliant, apathetic, he let Draco maneuver him to his feet and out of the room. Lips descended on his and his eyes widened as Neville's emotions cracked and shattered under Draco's hot passion.

"Snap out of it, you hear me?" Draco demanded roughly as he pulled away, panting.

Harry struggled to shut down his empathy. It was like shutting a door against a flood, but he managed. As soon as he was alone in his head, he gasped, feeling like it was his first real breath in days. Hands shaking in reaction, he pushed his forehead into his love's shoulder.

"God, Draco… He feels so broken…" he rasped, eyes tightly closed against tears.

Draco lifted his hand and stroked it over his lover's wavy locks. "He'll be fine. Just give him time."

"Ahem."

Harry blushed hotly as he jerked out of Draco's arms. Severus stood over by the kitchen table smirking, his arms crossed over his chest, a single slender eyebrow raised.

Draco didn't seem bothered by their audience. He wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist and gently pulled him forward. "We finished breakfast. Eat. Then we'll decide what we're going to do."

Harry sat down and quickly began to eat to prevent any comments from his father about the kiss he had witnessed.

Severus smiled in amusement, making Harry blush hotter. "I am glad you returned to us this morning."
"For any particular reason?" Harry asked suspiciously, eyeing his father. There was something strange about his tone.

Severus nodded and stepped away. He opened a cupboard, pulling down a green-wrapped present. The Potions Master lowered his head in a familiar gesture that would have had his shoulder-length hair curtaining his face. Unfortunately, his hair was still cut short and Harry could clearly see the man's awkwardness.

"Today is February 24th," Severus explained, handing the gift over.

Harry’s fingers tightened around the gift. February 24th was the day of the second task last year, the day he merged the last of his sane alters. It was the day Severus had created as Shadow Snape's birthday. Today Shadow Snape turned fifteen. He stared down at the wrapped box. It was about six inches tall.

"It's not really my birthday. I turned fifteen months ago," he muttered.

"Open it, Shadow," Severus ordered gently.

Harry knew that the slight emphasis on his name as Severus's adopted son was meaningful. Made up or not, it was a day that Severus thought worthy of celebration. On this day, last year, Shadow had become a person Severus was proud of and loved, the person he had adopted as his own.

Teary-eyed, Harry tore the paper and opened the box. Two small leather bound books sat inside. Harry carefully lifted them clear of the box and opened the first one. His eyes widened. It was Lily's diary! "How?" he gasped, staring at his father.

"It seems that Petunia had it all this time. Before I cleaned up at the Dursleys this summer, I summoned anything that belonged to either Lily or the Potters. This came flying out of the attic," Severus explained. "I was quite surprised myself. I didn't expect Petunia to have kept anything of your mother's. My apologies for not returning it to you sooner, but I was waiting for a special occasion and I wished to read it myself. Lily was a very good friend of mine."

Speechless, Harry carefully set the precious book aside and opened the second. It was a diary as well, Amalia's. Tears burning his eyes, Harry held it tightly. "Thank you," he whispered. Severus knew how much family meant to him and how much it hurt to have never known a mother's love. The gift was precious.

"You are welcome." Severus stepped forward to warmly clasp his son's shoulder. "Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday," Draco echoed with a grin. He bent over to hug his love from behind and laid his cheek against the soft, dark brown hair. "I'm sorry I don't have a gift."

"It's all right." Harry squeezed his forearm. "Really. This is wonderful."

Draco nodded and placed a quick kiss to his cheek before standing again.

"About our plans…” Harry began, clearing his throat and moving the conversation to less personal topics.

Severus obliged him after one last pat on the shoulder. "From what I understand, I think the best thing we can do is return to Grimmauld Place. The Triad will not be pleased with you disappearing again."

"What about Marissa?" Harry asked, cutting his eyes over to sullen girl coloring in front of the fire.
"We will drop her off at Hogwarts," Severus decided. "She will be safe there."

"Is Sirius still posing as Remus?" Draco asked.

"Yes, but he is sly. He will figure out a way to watch Marissa and teach. Lupin should return to his post soon."

"And Neville?" Harry pressed, still very worried about his brother.

"He will come with us. There will be people with the Order who can help him."

"They'll interrogate him," Draco muttered darkly. He remembered his own round with Charlie in the interrogation room.

"They won't cross the line." Severus smirked grimly. "Not with Lady Longbottom and the wolf present."

"Okay." Harry took a deep breath and looked at Draco and Severus with a Sirius-like reckless grin. "Let's do this."

**Chapter end.**
Hufflepuff: Hard work and Loyalty

Charlie, McGonagall, and Shacklebolt sat at the War Room table across from Severus, Draco, and Harry. All three of their faces were grim. Harry glanced to his right and left, noticing both Severus and Draco had their Slytherin masks on tight. No emotions could be read from their faces or eyes. He sighed and slouched a bit in his chair.

"Look. Can we just get this over with? You're mad I flaked out and you're scared I'll do it again. I don't know what to tell you." Harry rubbed at the bridge of his nose, lifting his glasses in the process. "I'm doing the best I can. I didn't ask to be the Chosen One. It sucks, but that's reality."

"Regardless, Mr. Potter or Mr. Snape, whichever you prefer…"

"Potter right now is fine. I go by whatever name is right for my face at the time," Harry interrupted Shacklebolt with a wry smile.

Shacklebolt frowned severely at him, no humor at all in his expression. "Regardless," he said again with a voice as hard and cold as glass, "we expect some consideration on your part."

"We are trying to win a war," McGonagall added. All her tolerance and compassion had been stripped from her over the past weeks. "Hogwarts is besieged by darkness. Death Eater raids still continue unchecked. The populace is desperate and afraid. Riots and mass evacuations have taken place. The death tolls are in the hundreds."

"We are losing," Charlie summed up. His hand curled into a fist as he glared at them across the table. "And our only hope is playing it close to the chest."

"We are not at your beck and call, Mr. Potter," Shacklebolt almost snarled. "You cannot tell us half-truths and pull these kind of stunts and expect us to shrug it off as if it doesn't matter."

"What do you want from me?" Harry snapped. He jumped to his feet and leaned over the table, his palms flat against the polished wood. "I don't have all the answers, okay! I'm doing the best I can, and excuse me for not telling you in advance when I'm going to go all Dark creature on you, but I DIDN'T KNOW! I couldn't contact you! I was out of my head at the time. When I came around, I came back. That's all I could do."

"Are we to just accept that? What about the next battle?" Shacklebolt demanded.

"And you just happened to bring back Severus without a Dark Mark, claiming he's cured," Charlie pointed out suspiciously. "How can we believe that this wasn't planned or deliberate?"

"The Dark Creature decided to consolidate those who I'm closest to. In other words, it's pack. I had no control over that. The fact that he removed the Dark Mark is as astonishing to us as it is to you. As for the next battle, I have no idea what I'll do or what will happen." Harry met their eyes and saw the frustration there. "Do what you want. You want me gone? Fine. I'll go. Good luck defeating the Dark Lord."

Shacklebolt exploded from his seat, slapping the table hard. "Don't threaten us, boy!"

Severus had his wand pointed at the man's head before the last word was out of the Auror's mouth.
Harry reached over and pushed his father's arm down. He glared at the large black man. "Don't call me that again." Taking a deep breath, he ran his hand through his hair. "This is ridiculous. We aren't enemies."

"What do you want from us?" Charlie asked calmly, hands folded in front of him.

"I want us to help each other."

"How can we help when we don't know what you're doing, what you're planning," McGonagall said coldly. "And don't act like you don't have a plan." Her eyes cut to Severus. "You always have a plan."

Harry glanced at his father and saw that Severus wasn't going to help him with this decision. It was up to him. Straightening, he demanded, "I want an Unbreakable Vow from all three of you that what I'm about to say will not be repeated, hinted at, researched, or passed on in any shape or form on pain of death."

The Triad stared, shocked, but Draco and Severus merely stared back at them, faces blank. Harry met their eyes, determination in every line of his body. He wasn't backing down.

"If you can't make that vow, then we carry on as we have before, telling you only so much and expecting you to help or not as you choose," Harry said after a long silent minute.

"I'm willing," Charlie announced without looking at his partners.

"Why the research clause, Harry?" McGonagall asked with narrowed eyes. "If we are to help you…"

"I know everything I need to know about the subject. I just need help executing the plan. You'll just have to trust me that you won't want anyone to research this topic."

"Very well. Since you've left me with no choice, I agree," she said stiffly, obviously not pleased.

"I do not agree," Shacklebolt growled. "Two of the Triad will outnumber my single vote, so if it is important I can be overruled, but it might be wise to have an objective opinion in the future."

Without another word, he made his way out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Harry came around the table so that he was facing both Charlie and McGonagall. "Severus, will you be our Bonder?"

The Potions Master nodded and came to stand beside him. "Of course," he said, but his eyes flicked to Harry asking if he was sure. The teenager nodded once. Seeing this, Severus lifted his wand and put the tip gently over Harry, McGonagall, and Charlie's clasped right hands. "Will you, Minerva McGonagall and Charlie Weasley, keep the secret I am about to reveal to yourselves?"

"I will," the two adults chorused.

A thick thread of glowing orange light snaked from Severus's wand and wound around their hands.

"And will you refrain from looking into the secret or having others research this secret?"

"I will," they said again.

A second thread was added to the first, making it look almost like a chain.

"And will you do all you can to prevent others from discovering this secret?"
"I will," Charlie and McGonagall finished, sealing the vow.

The last thread wrapped around their hands, completing the magical chain that burned the color of hot metal. The chain flared red and disappeared into their skin. All three of them shuddered and quickly pulled their hands back. Severus unobtrusively grabbed Harry’s elbow to steady him as they returned to their seats.

"Now what is this secret?" McGonagall demanded once they were all seated.

"The Dark Lord made six Horcruxes," Harry said with complete honesty.

He saw no reason to tell them about the seventh incomplete Horcrux, especially since he had removed the last of it's influences over him. He quickly described what a Horcrux was. Charlie paled and McGonagall looked ill.

"That's why he keeps coming back," Harry continued. "We've destroyed two of them. One was used to bring Voldemort back to life after the graveyard this summer. The remaining three are Hufflepuff’s Cup, Ravenclaw’s Diadem, and Nagini. We know Nagini will be with Voldemort, but we aren't sure of the location of the cup or diadem. We need help finding them. We can't attack Voldemort head on until we destroy them."

"Sweet Merlin," McGonagall whispered. "Why would anyone do such a thing? And six times…”

"He would do such a thing because he doesn't value his soul and we can see why. It has made him immortal," Charlie answered grimly. He focused on Harry. "Do you have any leads?"

"None," Harry admitted reluctantly.

"Can we have Order members search for the objects or will that be breaking the vow?"

Harry looked to Severus.

"You may not. It would be seen as indirectly pushing people to discover the Horcruxes," the man answered solemnly.

"Then how are we to help you?"

"You can research the locations yourself," Draco spoke for the first time. "You have many resources available to you that we do not. Give us access to them. When the time comes that we find the location of one, we will inform you and you can help us plan a way to retrieve it. Trust me, they will be well guarded."

"Very well. I will see what I can find at Hogwarts." McGonagall nodded decisively. "Both Horcruxes are significant to the school. I should be able to find some information on them."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

She nodded and offered him a small smile. "Good luck, Harry."

"And anything you need to look at just tell me and I'll get it for you," Charlie added once she was gone.

"Thank you," Harry said again. "I'm not sure what…"

He was interrupted when a knock came on the door behind him. He turned to look and was surprised to find Neville and a worried Remus step into the room followed by a bandaged goblin. Neville shut
the door once everyone was inside.

"Griphook has something to say," the teen said tiredly, his eyes not meeting anyone's in the room.

"I make deal with Earth child only!" Griphook snarled, crossing his arms and wincing when he bent his damaged arm.

Neville sighed. "Tell them."

The goblin scowled once more, then came to a decision. He planted himself in front of Neville and pretended like no one else was in the room. "I want the lost treasure, Ragnuk the First's sword, stolen from our people by Godric Gryffindor. We sensed it come awake three years ago at the wizard's school. Give it to Griphook, Earth Child, and I will help you defeat your enemy who wishes to turn the Earth to his own purposes. I will help you get the goblet with the Evil One's soul."

"What!" Harry exclaimed. "You know where Hufflepuff's Cup is?"

Griphook didn't even twitch, deaf to anyone but Neville.

"Where is it?" Neville dutifully repeated.

"In the Lestrange vault, one of the most ancient chambers, stored at the deepest level, where the vaults are largest and best protected. Though the goblins of Gringotts will consider it base treachery, I will help you in exchange for the sword."

Draco's eyes widened. "You will help us break into a vault?"

Again Neville repeated the question.

"I will help, but the other goblins will not. We must work fast. Is this a bargain, Earth Child? My assistance for the sword?"

Neville looked to Harry who nodded. "Yes," Neville agreed. "But only if you agree to work with everyone in this room."

Griphook grinned showing off his mouthful of pointy teeth. "Agreed." Darting forward, he slashed his nails across Neville's palm. The brunet didn't even flinch. "The pact is sealed with blood. Let us begin."

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They spent all the rest of that day studying the hand-drawn maps Griphook created of the layout and protections of Gringotts. The goblin refused to detail the areas that they wouldn't have to go through to reach the Lestrange vault. They accepted that easily and Griphook seemed mildly surprised by this. But really, they had enough in front of them to deal with. They didn't need extra information confusing the issue.

By the end of the night they had an outline of a plan. Sunday was the best day to try and pull this off since most wizards tended not to do their banking that day, which in turn allowed Gringotts to function with only half the staff. Therefore, they had four days to get ready. Luckily, on the same level as the Lestrange vault was the Black vault. Draco could get them right next door to their target by being the Black heir. That left figuring out a way to actually break into the vault and a way to escape once all the alarms began to sound.

A small group would be best for that type of mission. After much discussion, it was decided that
Draco would go, of course, as Black heir. Remus would accompany him carrying Gryffindor's sword as would Severus in disguise. Basically the two adults would act as Draco's bodyguard. It wasn't uncommon, especially if the wizard was planning on taking something of great value from his vault. And, finally, Harry would go under the Invisibility cloak with Griphook.

Charlie and McGonagall were not at all pleased by Harry being a part of the team. He was the Chosen One and couldn't be risked unnecessarily, but Harry insisted. His father and lover were going; he wasn't going to allow them to go without him.

The next morning, Thursday morning, McGonagall, Neville, Remus, and Harry returned to Hogwarts secretly through Slytherin Chamber. McGonagall and Remus continued on to the Headmistress's office where McGonagall reluctantly gave Remus the sword. Meanwhile, Harry grabbed his cloak and said goodbye to Neville.

"Don't keep to yourself too much," Harry admonished, hands on Neville's slumped shoulders. It was like seeing the old Neville, from before he gained confidence. "Stay close to your friends. We love you, Nev. You don't have to alone."

Neville nodded, blushing. "Thanks, Harry."

They hugged tightly, and as Harry released him, he suggested that Neville should talk to Flitwick about seeing his sister. "She can help you explore your magic. She'll tell you truthfully if it is now tainted."

Neville blanched.

"Nev, promise me you'll see her." Harry stared hard into his eyes. "The worst that can happen is she confirms your fears. Nothing will be different, but she could also say I'm right and that your magic is the same. It's worth the risk. Promise me."

"Okay," Neville whispered in defeat. "I'll talk to her."

"Good." Harry hugged him again and walked him to the entrance of the Chamber.

Harry watched him go with a worried frown. Throwing on his Invisibility cloak, he made his way from the Chamber to Slytherin's common room. He found Rogan, Miles, and Lillian sitting by the fire studying silently. Harry shook his head at the sight. Those three silent wasn't natural. They were always talking, making jokes, smirking, even when studying. He crept up to Miles and whispered in his ear that he was there. The small Slytherin jerked as if electrocuted and gasped.

"What's wrong?" Rogan immediately asked. "Is it your legs?"

"No. I, um, was just… tired. I need to rest. Will you two help me to my room?"

Lillian and Rogan shared a worried glance before Rogan answered, "Of course, Miles. Here…"

Miles accepted his hand and they made their way slowly up stairs to their dorm room. Harry grit his teeth in anger when he saw that Miles's left leg didn't bend at the knee. It made walking a tedious thing. Lillian quickly packed up their things and hurried after them. Once all three where in Miles's room and the door shut, Harry pulled off the cloak.

"Hey. How are you guys?"

Three sets of eyes stared at him in utter and complete shock. Lillian's mouth literally hung open and Miles had stopped breathing.
"What?"

"Wh-what are you doing here?" Rogan asked faintly, eyes huge in his face.

"What do you mean? I just wanted to make sure that..." Harry trailed off as sudden realization hit him. Dear God! He still looked like Harry Potter! No wonder they were shocked. He thought quickly, heart pounding in his chest as adrenaline surged through his veins. "Oh, yeah. Forgot." He laughed and winced when it sounded strained in his own ears. "It's me, Shadow! They have us drink Polyjuice to look like Potter to give false sightings. I was given a few rounds to make and it brought me close to Hogwarts, so I used the Chamber to sneak in and thought I'd check up on you. I forgot I still look like him."

They didn't seem convinced.

"See..." Harry quickly incanted the counter-spell on the Dark glamour. The lightning bolt scar shimmered and faded, leaving his forehead bare. "No scar. Not the real Harry."

Lillian scowled suspiciously, but Miles smiled in welcome. "Shadow! Merlin, that's crazy! You could be captured and killed."

"Nah, I'm careful." Harry smirked at him.

"Can you change back?" Rogan demanded. "This is totally weird."

"Can't. Polyjuice will run out on its own and I'm not staying long. I just wanted to check in. How are the Slytherins?"

"Fine," Lillian grudgingly admitted. "We still use the Room of Requirement at night. It's making a lot of difference. Sometimes we don't practice dueling or Occlumency. We just talk and rant a bit."

"That's good." Harry frowned, looking at Rogan. "Are any of you making progress with Occlumency?"

"Not really," he answered. "It's not something you can learn without a teacher."

Harry nodded sadly. "I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay," Miles insisted. "You've done a lot for us."

"What happened to your leg?"

"Carrow," he answered simply. "The spell wasn't supposed to cause so much damage, but with my condition my bones break so easily. She was so surprised when I screamed. I don't think she'll pick on me for a while."

Harry couldn't believe Miles could say that with a smile. "Do you need potions?"

"No. Madam Pomfrey sneaks us potions. We're okay." The young teen was still smiling brightly.

"All right. Well, you still have that charm to sneak into the Chamber if you need to escape," Harry reminded them, wishing he could do more.

"Thanks, Shadow." Rogan clasped his shoulder, shaking his head ruefully. "Never expected to be this close to the Golden Boy."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, well. Don't do anything hasty. It's still me in here."
Rogan laughed and Lillian giggled. Feeling like that was as good a time as ever to leave, he flung the cloak back over his head and slipped away. He couldn't believe he'd made such a stupid mistake, going to them looking like Harry Potter! Severus and Draco were going to kill him. Maybe it would be better not to mention it to them.

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Friday and Saturday were spent planning. They came up with dozens of scenarios of what could happen once the alarm was raised with Griphook's help and ways out of each sticky situation. It was clear that they had to be prepared to be creative and to think on their feet since there was no way to know exactly how it would go down.

Keeping that in mind, they practiced dueling a couple hours each day. Harry worked himself tirelessly and paid for it at night as his muscles cramped and spasmed. Draco said nothing about this, just laid with him and helped work out the kinks. He worked alongside Harry, dueling against several Order members, but didn't push himself to the brink like Harry did. He wisely took breaks and was therefore stronger come Saturday night than Harry who was wiped out.

"Maybe Dad will give me a potion," Harry groaned, pressing his face into his pillow as Draco worked on the back of his calf.

"I'm sure he will. Don't worry, Harry. We'll get the cup."

"I just…" He turned and sat up, facing the blond. Draco met his eyes calmly as Harry lifted a hand and traced his cheek, over his lips, down his neck. "I just don't want to lose you or anyone else. I just got Neville and Severus back… I…"

Draco captured his hand and gently kissed his lips. Harry gasped, feeling sparks shoot down his body to settle pleasantly in his stomach. Draco lapped at the warm entrance, tasting the flavor that was uniquely his love's. It was delicious and addicting. Groaning, he pulled away, his mouth on fire. He wanted more, but he knew Harry was tired.

"Nothing's going to happen to us. We're ready. You're ready. We'll be fine."

"Don't say that." Harry scowled and flopped back on the bed. "You'll jinx us."

Draco smiled at him. "Go to sleep. We have to get up early."

Harry nodded and smiled when Draco lay next to him, hugging him to his smooth chest. In minutes, he was fast asleep, Draco's body heat surrounding him, keeping him safe.

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Coming back to school wasn't everything Neville had hoped it would be. He'd wanted things to go back to normal, as if his kidnapping hadn't happened. Now he saw how naïve that hope really was. He'd been back at Hogwarts since Thursday. It was only Sunday afternoon and already he knew nothing would be the same at all.

Ginny had been so happy to see him, jumping on him and hugging him tightly, but then she and the others had wanted to know what happened to him. He couldn't tell them, didn't want to remember, and although the others tried to hide it, he knew they were disappointed. Worse, all of Gryffindor pitied him. They walked on eggshells around him, afraid to upset him, and there was no escaping it since he couldn't leave the Tower.

Because he was certain Carrow had helped in his kidnapping, he didn't feel safe officially coming
back to the school. The headmistress had been kind enough to allow him to hide in the Tower for as long as he needed, so instead of going to classes, he studied in the dorm, doing the homework assigned to his housemates. That left him a lot of time to think, alone, surrounded by a place that should have felt comfortable and familiar, but only emphasized how different he was now.

Ginny tried to be supportive, but he knew she was getting frustrated. He kept pushing her away, pulling away from the hugs and refusing to kiss, refusing to tell her what happened. The only good thing about being back was he could now go to the DA meetings and go to the Slytherin meetings at midnight. He didn't have to be afraid of being followed since Carrow and the other teachers didn't know he was back at Hogwarts.

In fact, the only time he felt completely comfortable was with the Slytherins, who didn't know him well enough to ask him sensitive questions or care about him one way or another. To them, he was just Neville, not someone damaged like the Gryffindors saw him, as was proven in DA. His partners would pull their spells, putting less power in them, worried he'd be hurt or scared.

It was infuriating and made him feel small. The only reason he kept going to DA was because of Luna. The girl acted just the same as she always did around him, and when they dueled, she didn't treat him any differently, often sending him back on his butt, especially since he'd been refusing to use his Earth magic. His shields were definitely not what they once were. Still Luna didn't let up and he was pathetically grateful.

He was even considering staying in the Chamber instead of Gryffindor Tower, but then he would be alone all the time and not just during classes. Being alone wasn't what he needed, either. He was tempted to ask the Slytherins to let him stay there. He was surprised at how well they got along. The Slytherins were grateful for his help and treated him accordingly.

"What are you doing?"

Neville jumped half a foot and spun around to look at the doorway.

"Oh, Neville. Don't let the snorkblasts get to you." Luna walked over and sat beside him. Her small, pale fingers clasped his hand before gently sliding the razor blade from his fist.

"I was just thinking. It's easier to think when everything is quiet," Neville answered softly. His eyes were on his arm. Five cuts crisscrossed his forearm. He didn't even remember doing it, he'd been so lost in thought. Still, he couldn't bring himself to regret it. For once the shame, frustration, and the fear that he'd never be okay again, his rage and self-loathing, all of it was gone, quieted as he'd said. He could see clearer, think clearer; it was peace.

"When my mother died," Luna began, her blue eyes looking right at him. "We planted a tree. Do you know why?"

Neville shook his head, still numb and loving it.

"Because it's something we can look at, to help us remember her, but more importantly, it helps us remember that all things change. That it's okay, the pain won't always be so bad, that she's not gone permanently, just changed. You can see it in the tree, you see. It's full of flowers in spring, it grows tall in summer, only to lose its leaves in fall and become bare branches in winter."

"Winter, huh?" Neville smiled darkly.

"There are many winters in your life, Neville, but also many springs. Soon spring will come again. You just have to survive the winter. Neville, I think you need to plant a tree to remember."
"Remember what?" His heart rate had kicked up, fear slicing through his artificial calm. He didn't want anything to do with trees or Earth.

"Remember spring, remember winter doesn't last forever." Luna smiled brightly and stood, offering her hand. "Come on, Neville. Let's go plant your tree."

"Uh… Maybe later…" he hedged.

"Now," Luna said firmly and shook her hand in demand. "Don't make me Slytherin you out of this bathroom."

"What?" Neville couldn't help but smile at her.

"I'll tell what you were doing in here. I'll tell your brother, your heart-father, and I'll tell the Headmistress."

Immediately, Neville flushed bright red with fury. He leapt to his feet and grabbed her by the shoulders. "You won't tell anyone!"

"Course not." She smiled sweetly. "You're going to plant your tree."

"I don't have a tree to plant," he grumbled mutinously as he followed her out of the boy's bathroom and down toward the courtyards.

She skipped ahead, humming happily. "Yes, you do."

Eventually they reached the courtyard where he'd had his lessons in Earth magic. Panic made his palms sweaty and his heart rocket against his ribs. He really didn't want to do this, but Luna looked back at him, her blond hair whipping around her in the strong breeze, her blue eyes implacable.

"Wh-where's the t-tree?" he asked faintly.

She answered by placing her small hand over his heart.

"Oh no!" Neville scrambled back toward the door. "No, Luna. I can't!"

"Do it," Luna ordered, very much unlike her. "You need this, Neville. Trust me."

"I CAN'T!"

"Yes, you can." She came for him. "Please, Neville. Bend with the wind."

"No, no, please, I can't." He was shaking now, desperate tears scorching his cheeks.

"BEND! Don't break."

Neville spun and ran to the door, but it wouldn't open. He looked over his shoulder, terrified, and froze. Luna stood in the center of the courtyard, his razor still in her hand. Her expression had lost its intensity. It was slack and dreamy, her normal expression, but the blood sliding down her arm, pooling in her palm, dripping into the ground only to disappear wasn't normal at all.

"What are you doing?" he rasped, hoarse and horrified. "Luna, stop."

"There are too many snorkblasts. I can't fight them all," she answered in a sing-song voice. "Don't worry, Neville. I can bend. I'll be okay."
She drew the razor across her perfect skin once more and he winced. In that moment, he hated her. Hated her with all he was. She was forcing him to do something he wasn't ready for, may never be ready for again. She was blackmailing him, *Slythering* him, as she'd warned. Hating her, he stepped forward, his face twisted into an ugly expression. He wasn't sure if he was going to attack her or do what she wanted until the last instant.

He grabbed for his magic and let it roar into him. The ground shook. He felt himself stretching, burrowing deep, tasting Luna's blood in the soil. Then he was thrashed about in the wind, groaning and creaking, remembering how easy it was to manipulate death, to bring it forth in order to live, but he also remembered the good things about Earth magic as it filled him to the brim with a sense of vitality, of beauty.

Confused, hurt, he dug down deep, deeper than he ever had, in a desperate attempt to understand this contradiction his magic embodied.

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Harry held his breath as the goblin examined the vault key Draco had handed him. Harry stood right behind his love, Griphook on his back, his scrawny arms wrapped tightly around his throat. Both of them had just managed to fit underneath the Invisibility cloak with the pack Harry carried on his front in case the worst happened and they were discovered.

Severus and Remus were standing behind Harry to either side of Draco like good bodyguards. Both of them were under Polyjuice. Severus was a tall, blonde muscle head, while Remus was an older black man. They couldn't have picked disguises that looked more different if they'd tried, but both had a readiness in their posture that said they weren't to be messed with.

"Sir, this is the correct key," the goblin said as he pocketed it. "However, we still must be sure of your identity. The Black vault is one of our oldest and most prestigious vaults. Please step this way and we'll verify your magical signature."

Draco kept his gaze level, his stance unwavering. "We appreciate your thorough security measures. It reassures us that the Black family has not misplaced our trust."

Harry blushed hotly as his heart rate picked up, arousal uncoiling from his core. Draco should have sounded ridiculous using the royal first person plural, but instead he sounded cool and confident, completely in control. It was sexy as hell, though Harry would never admit that to him. Draco was conceited enough as it was.

The goblin was affected as well. He flushed and scrambled around the counter, hand gesturing for Draco to follow. "Right this way, Lord Black. My name is Bogrod. I'm sure we'll get this done with quickly."

Draco inclined his head regally and strode after the flustered goblin. Severus and Remus followed, Harry at his heels, across the marble atrium and over toward the large golden vault doors where you enter the carts that would take you to your vault. Beside the doors stood four goblins, obviously in the prime of their lives. Bogrod snapped his fingers and said something in rapid goblin.

One of the guards ran off and returned with a small brown bag that had several large metal pieces in it from the sound it made. In his other hand were two stone hoops about two feet in diameter. The goblin handed the hoops to Bogrod, who bowed once more to Draco before throwing one hoop into the air. Harry gasped as it twirled before falling around Draco's head, hovering there like a halo. As it spun, a whirling noise, low and resonant came from it.
Harry stared, eyes wide at the miraculous sight. Bogrod lifted the Black vault key out of his pocket and set the hoop around it before letting both go. Again, as they hovered in the air, the whirling, whooping sound slowly grew louder. It was a beautiful sound, but if it got much louder, Harry was going to have to clap his hands over his ears. Before it got that bad, Bogrod clapped his hands and both hoops flew toward him. He caught them easily as Draco snatched the key out of the air as it began to fall.

With a wry twist of his lips, he presented it again. "We assume you are reassured of our identity."

"Yes, of course, my lord," Bogrod said humbly, bowing deeply before accepting the key back with much more grace than he had before. "The Clankers, Tripid," the old goblin demanded, and immediately the leather bag was placed in his hands. Bogrod turned his eyes back to Draco. "We shall go to your vault now. Do you wish your guards to accompany you?"

"They shall come," Draco answered evenly.

"Very well. This way."

Harry frowned when Bogrod unlocked the golden doors and led them to a four person cart, but he'd have to make do. Waiting until Bogrod and Draco were settled in the front and Remus and Severus in the back, he climbed into his father's lap, pinning Griphook between his back and Severus's chest. The goblin wasn't happy about that and muttered lowly in his language, his spindly fingers almost choking him.

Bogrod did something and the cart rocketed forward. They rocketed along the track that resembled a rollercoaster more than anything else. Sharp turns to the right and left almost had him flying out if he hadn't such a firm grip on his father's thighs. Slowly, they spiraled their way downward toward the oldest, deepest vaults.

When Griphook had said the Lestrange and Black vaults were next to each other, he didn't mean literally. They were on the same level, but they were on opposite sides of the track, separated by a large hall and a tethered dragon. They'd have to move quickly once they stopped. Harry took deep breaths in preparation.

His concentration was shattered however when Griphook gasped in his ears. Eyes jerking forward he saw they were heading right toward a waterfall. They were moving so fast, however, that before he could do anything, they were already under it and through, completely drenched. The cart jerked to a stop as they all spluttered, again almost slamming Harry forward into the back of Bogrod.

"What is the meaning of this?" Draco demanded hotly.

"The waterfall removes all glamours and concealing magic, my lord," Bogrod said conciliatory. "It is just another security measure set up to protect your vault, my lord. Did you know your guards were not who they appeared to be?" The goblin's eyes almost glowed as they turned toward a now normal and wet looking Severus and Remus.

"Do you think we are so stupid not to know who guards our backs, goblin?" Draco asked coldly. "Their appearances were at my order." The sudden shift to first person singular only made the statement that much sharper. "Had you asked, we would have explained. Now our guards are compromised. You've endangered the Black heir."

"I… I'm sorry, my lord." Bogrod's smug expression had shifted into horror.

"I will report your carelessness to my family, Goblin Bogrod," Draco intoned icily. "Continue. And
let's hope there are no more security measures. The Black vault does not need to be guarded from us. Or is it that Gringotts has become overly fond of the Black treasure and does not wish to see it returned to its rightful owners?"

"No. No, of course not, my lord. We shall go immediately." Bogrod practically leapt on the controls and had them shooting forward once again.

Harry smiled, though Draco couldn't see it, as the blond shot a worried look back at Severus and Remus. He felt Severus nod and Draco faced front again, pulling back on his Pureblood, aristocratic mask.

"This cloak should have disintegrated…” Griphook rasped in Harry's ear. Green eyes shifted to look over his shoulder at the goblin. Seeing the astounded expression on the goblin's face, he shrugged lightly. Griphook shook himself. The cloak wasn't important. They had a treasure to steal.

The cart slowed more gently this time before coming to a halt in a large cavern. Harry stared. Griphook had described it, but seeing it with his own eyes was something totally different. The dragon was enormous. Pale white, with pink eyes, the poor beast was chained and there were ugly scars all down it's sides and mussel.

"Quick! Do it now," Griphook hissed as Harry continued to stare at the dragon. Jerking, he pointed his wand at the back of Bogrod as the goblin walked across the cavern toward the beast. "Imperio," he hissed, eyes narrowed in deep concentration.

Magic left him in a powerful punch, funneled through his wand, and spiraled out like an invisible tornado that teased the robes of the three wizards in front of him as it passed. The elder goblin tensed, his step faltering before he turned and smiled at Draco.

"It's right here, my lord." He turned back around and shook the Clankers, making them clang loudly. The dragon reared, flinching back and away from the tunnels it guarded, its eyes wild as it roared.

"It worked!" Griphook exclaimed excitedly, his grip tightening. "He's going toward the Lestrange vault, not the Black.

The three wizards hurried after the goblin. At the end of a short tunnel, they came to another golden door. Bogrod gracefully spilled the Clankers into his palm. The four large golden disks glinted in the torchlight. Bogrod threw them up as he placed his free palm against the vault door. The disks clanked and clanged as they jumbled around each other.

Harry immediately recognized the tune as something different than the one they had heard from the hoops upstairs. His shoulders tightened as the door began to vanish, revealing a chamber filled with gold, artifacts, and heirlooms. He stepped inside quickly on the heels of his family. Gasping, he spun as the door shut behind them, plunging them into darkness.

"Lumos," Remus incanted calmly, filling the room with white light.

Harry relaxed at seeing Bogrod just inside the door, still with them.

"He can open the door when we want to leave," Griphook explained, voice harsh as he jumped from Harry's back. The teen quickly folded and pocketed the precious cloak. "Hurry! They will know the Lestrange vault has been opened. We must be quick!"

Harry stepped forward while the others fanned out behind him, their eyes scanning the items in the vault. His foot hit a pile of galleons. The coins grew and spilled over onto the floor. Harry jumped
back with a surprised gasp, smoke literally coming up from where his shoes came in contact with the coins.

"Gemino and Flagrante Curses," Severus hissed. "Don't touch anything or we'll be swimming in this stuff."

Draco cursed as one of the spilled coins rolled against his toes. More spilled out everywhere. It was impossible to avoid everything completely and very slowly more treasure exploded and filled the room with burning hot heat. Remus began casting anti-burning charms at them, but the Flagrante Curse was so powerful that it wouldn't hold for long.

Severus hissed as the treasure was up to his ankles now, pain searing through his skin. Draco was yelping, dancing around as his eyes darted frantically about. Harry was in the same predicament, the goblin back on his back to get away from the burning metal.

"Hurry, hurry," Griphook chanted unhelpfully in his ear. Remus was sweating, his protective charm a constant chant on his lips.

"THERE!" Draco screamed, finally seeing the blasted thing.

It was floating near the ceiling, out of reach, mocking them. In a weird way, the rapidly growing treasure was helping them. Harry climbed on top, his clothes burning to crisps along his knees and shins, his skin searing before cooling temporarily with Remus's help.

Panting in pain, sweat rolling down his face, Harry reached toward the werewolf. "The sword," he yelled desperately.

Severus was doing his best to erect barriers, trying to create a magical field on top of the growing ocean of hot gold under them to keep them on top. He was only slightly successful because the surface was constantly shifting and changing. He had to physically yank Draco up and out of the pile, the teen buried to his waist and howling in pain. Remus, trapped up to his knees, flung the shrunk sword at Harry.

"Merlin," Draco rasped, agonized as he leaned against Severus and tried to help him with the warding.

"Fuck." Through gritted teeth, Harry grasped the burning hilt of the damn Gryffindor sword and returned it to its real size. He strained, arm out stretched, as the tip of the sword knocked against the base of the chalice. Hot, so hot, and it fucking hurt so bad... Muscles clenched against the pain, he stretched further. "Come on, come on."

Rough, muffled sobbing could be heard behind him. Severus was hissing with every inhale in. Remus was growling, the cooling charms slowing as he lost concentration. Almost... The tip of the sword tapped the handle. Desperately, blinking sweat out of his eyes, Harry aimed again and finally threaded the sword through.

"Got it!" he screamed.

Severus immediately looked for Bogrod. The goblin and his Clankers were the only way out of this death trap. To his horror, he realized the goblin was nowhere in sight, buried for who knew how long under the burning swell of gold. "LIBERACORPUS!" he bellowed, wand snapping like a whip.

Bogrod came flying to the surface, but he was unconscious.
Harry grabbed Griphook by the back of his neck and flung him at his father.

Severus caught the creature clumsily and quickly dropped him.

Remus yanked Draco up against him as the teen screamed, going under again.

Griphook grabbed the Clankers and flung himself at the door. Musical tones resonated through the door, making it melt away once again.

Things happened really quickly after that. They rode a wave of the treasure out of the vault, crashing into the first line of goblins with bows and arrows. The goblins shrieked as they came in contact with the searing hot metal. Arrows went off. Remus was shot in the shoulder, Harry was grazed along his cheek. The wave of treasure had them spilling to opposite sides of the large chamber: Draco with Remus, Harry with Severus.

The goblins bellowed battle cries. Griphook demanded the sword, practically clawing at Harry's hand. Harry held the goblin's gaze and released the sword into the greedy hands. Sharp teeth flashed in a triumphant grin before he was swallowed by the crowd of his brethren. Severus blasted them back with a powerful curse as Harry panted, still hurting.

"Over here!" Draco screamed.

Harry looked to see Draco and Remus scurrying up the befuddled dragon's side. Arrows bounced off their legs and backs, Remus having cast the Impervious Charm on their clothes. Harry quickly did the same for Severus and himself. Horrified, he realized they'd never make it. Two dozen goblins, more arriving every minute, a river of cursed gold, and wizards stood between him and the dragon. He pulled Hufflepuff's Cup out of his pocket and sent it rocketing toward the blond. Draco snatched it out of the air on reflex.

"Go! We'll find another way! Go, Draco!" Harry screamed.

He didn't have time to see if his love obeyed him. Severus yanked him backward, a goblin sword swiping through the air where his head had been. They turned and ran up the tunnel with the cart tracks. The goblins roared and came after them, only to freeze when the dragon screamed and began thrashing about, the whole tunnel shaking under the assault.

Harry darted to the side as a large rock fell from the ceiling, crashing to the ground. Fire whooshed, a wave of heat, goblins screamed in pain. The flapping of wings came from behind him and he looked back to see the white dragon diving for the tunnel, trying to escape. Heart pounding, Harry looked around desperately for safety. Severus yanked him sideways into a side tunnel. They ran as fast as they could as fire licked at their heels, the dragon roaring.

*Thank god for the Impervious Charm,* Harry thought, frantic.

The tunnel they'd taken grew smaller and smaller. Soon they were bent over, the earth scraping their shoulders on either side. It was completely dark. The sounds of battle slowly faded, and Harry began to breathe more normally. Earthy smells, his own sweat, filled the darkness around him. Only the sound of Severus's distinctive limp reassured him he wasn't alone. The tunnel bent and turned. They walked for at least half an hour before Severus stopped and Harry bumped into his back.

"Dead end," he explained. "Let's rest."

Harry nodded, even though he knew his father couldn't see him. With a tired sigh, he slid down the side of the wall, having to cross his legs in the tight space, unable to straighten them. His back was cramping from moving forward in a half-bow for so long and it felt good to sit. He reached inside the
pack he'd miraculously managed to hold on to and pulled out healing potions and lotion.

His fingers brushed the Invisibility cloak. He grinned as an idea came to him. Pulling it out, he put it against the ceiling and sides, spelling them there so it hung like a curtain. Then he cast Lumos so they could see without being seen.

His father was sitting much closer than Harry had expected. With the light, he realized just how small a space they were in. The rounded tunnel curved inward all around him and his lungs clenched with the realization that hundreds of tons of earth was pressing down on their heads. They were squeezed in a space no wider than a closet, the ceiling no more than three feet above their heads.

Severus watched as his son's eyes widened in animalistic panic, his arms twitched in a flail-like gesture, his breath wheezing in and out of his lungs. "Occlude. Stay calm. We are safe," Severus said softly, knowing if Harry panicked, he would run mindlessly down the tunnel and most likely into enemy hands. His hand tightened around his wand, ready to use it to knock his son unconscious.

Harry gasped, terror beating like a second heart in his chest. Desperately he closed his eyes and canceled the light charm. Plunged in darkness, his panic lessened somewhat but not enough. It took much too long to reach the ocean in his mind. As soon as he did, however, he began to relax. Here, there was wide open space and cool water moving with rhythmic currents. He watched the colorful fish swim in the calming blue-green water until his heart rate slowed to normal and he felt almost like he was in a trance.

Severus smiled as Harry went limp. Feeling the tension leaving his son’s coiled body, he softly cast Lumos. Harry didn't even twitch, so lost in his mind was he. Satisfied, Severus reached for the pack and the healing supplies they had. Carefully he spelled Harry naked and began to apply it to his legs and hips, his forearms and hands. Some burns were worst than others. His knee had no skin at all, bone showing gruesomely. Blood soaked his shins, meaty flesh showing through on his calves. His right palm was the worst, however. Ligaments and tendons glistened wetly in the spell-light.

Hissing in anger, Severus carefully tended each wound with healing lotion and a numbing ointment. The worst he wrapped in gaze to protect it. Then he spelled the tattered and singed clothes back on his son's body. Repairing charms could only do so much, but at least he was clothed. Harry was still in his mind, so he began to tend his own wounds. They were bad on his legs, but his arms and hands had thankfully taken no damage. He was just finishing when Harry stirred.

"Sorry," he whispered, voice calm, almost sleepy sounding.

"It is understandable," Severus murmured back soothingly. "You need to drink a potion."

"Okay." Harry opened his good hand, waiting.

Severus placed the healing potion against his palm and watched as the small fingers curled around it. His son was such a juxtaposition of child and adult. He ached to protect the last bit of child-like qualities that were disappearing way too quickly, but Severus knew the war would swallow those pieces quickly enough. Grimacing at his thoughts, Severus swallowed a healing potion himself.

"What's the plan?" Harry asked, his green eyes clearing as the self-induced trance slipped away.

"We wait here until things calm down," Severus responded. "We'll have to play it by ear after that."

Harry nodded. He leaned his head back against the rocky wall. "Do you think they got away?"

"Draco is clever," Severus answered.
Harry nodded again. The silence stretched. "What happened when Voldemort got in your head?"

Severus looked over at him, meeting his gaze. With a sigh, he settled more comfortably, mirroring his son's pose. "I didn't notice anything for a long while. I became suspicious when I realized my mental defenses were activating without my doing." He closed his eyes as he remembered. "My emotions cooled. I became focused on my current tasks, not allowing background thoughts or chatter. A headache grew every time I was with you or thought about you."

"When did it start?"

"Some time at the end of January, I suspect. He didn't get past my barriers until I was halfway finished with your Revertion Potion a little bit into February," Severus admitted. "I had to lockdown, so to speak, and leave at that point."

Harry shuddered. That meant that Severus's mind had been tested for weaknesses for almost three weeks before Severus broke. "What did you do?" he asked again.

"I placed myself in an artificial mindset, disallowing even myself from accessing true memories or information." Severus slit open his eyes. "I'm sure you can understand this better than anyone else."

"A false personality, a false set of memories… You created an alter?" Harry was aghast.

"Not to the extent that you are able to, certainly." Severus smirked. "While you create whole persons, I am merely able to create a temporary mask."

"What mask?" Harry asked intrigued. He'd never thought others experienced, even slightly, what he did with his alters.

"I reverted to what I was before Amalia, before my trial. Bitter but beginning to turn against the Dark because Lily, my childhood friend, had been threatened. Back then I was jealous of Potter having a child, Lily's child. I loved her. She was my first love. It wasn't until Amalia that bitterness left me and I realized what true love really was verses infatuation."

Harry nodded. He understood that. He'd experienced his own bout of jealousy over Dudley growing up. That poisonous emotion shaped you and not for the better. "I'm glad you're back."

"As am I." Severus smiled and gently clasped his son's leg above the knee. "Tell me how you are."

"I'm fine," Harry answered automatically and grinned when Severus snorted. Sighing, he closed his eyes again. Confronting these things was always so much better in the dark. He was shocked to discover how desperately he wanted to talk about some things with his father, to have him help him work things out in his own head. "I'm a mess."

Severus frowned sharply. He'd thought Harry was doing well. He'd been shocked at how affectionate he was with Draco and how happy they seemed, so he hadn't expected the whispered confession he'd received. All his senses went on alert, even as his emotions stilled, so he could listen without missing any cues or subtle telling gestures. "How so?"

"I can't believe we're talking about this stuff now." Harry laughed and covered his face. "We're hiding from goblins, miles under the earth. We may not even escape and we're sitting here in the dark having a therapy session."

"We will be here a while until the alarm decreases. It would be better to talk to speed time," Severus gently returned.
Harry stared at the back of his eyelids as his emotions boiled up from the tight control he'd placed them under. His empathy cracked open and it was such a relief to feel the familiar and comforting calm pool his father radiated once more. It wrapped him in a sense of care and safety. Lulled, words bubbled to his lips and spilled over.

"I've been dreaming, but it's been weird. Not like it happened with my other alters. I'll see my life, my things, but I'll see it through Seraphim's eyes. It shows me what he'd think of what I was doing, of where I am, of who I'm around. At first, it made me hate him more. I would hate to be that paranoid, that completely afraid of everyone and everything. Hate to be so certain I'll be hurt at any moment if I don't protect myself completely."

"At first," Severus repeated. "What changed?"

Harry rolled his head from side to side against the wall. "I'm not sure. I began to dream of what would make Seraphim happy. Having everyone he cared about safe and together in one place, a place where no one else could come. Then I'd see the people I care about there, too. I could understand where he was coming from. I mean, it would be comforting to know everyone I loved was safe, but I still can't imagine living like that. Trapped in one house, never to leave, no one else allowed to leave, either."

Harry sighed and stared down at his hands, one of them wrapped from wrist to fingers in gauze. "I know it would protect me from getting hurt, but it would also keep me from really living life. I want to live my life, not hide away from it, even though it can be scary and it can hurt me." He shook his head hard and closed his eyes. "God, I want to live, really live."

Severus must admit, if only to himself, that he leaned more toward Seraphim's urge. Had he not built his house in secret and locked his family there? He would never have left himself if it weren't for Dumbledore's demand that he come teach. Amalia had humored him, but she felt more along the lines of Shadow, wanting to live, hating confinement even for her own protection. That need for freedom, for life, opened her up to attack, had gotten her and Tabitha killed, so Seraphim's fears weren't unfounded.

"I still can't stand the thought of becoming Seraphim, of merging with him until all that's left is a self that can't reach out, that can't be happy until he's locked away safe from the world, safe from himself." Harry laughed bitterly. "But that wouldn't even be true, would it? I'd never be safe from the memories. I'd be haunted forever by it, slowly driven more and more insane from the terror and rage. The calm moments between wouldn't be enough. It would be torture."

"We wouldn't let you suffer. We'd help you," Severus murmured, pained by that vision of the future.

"You'd try," Harry allowed. "But admit it. Seraphim is never going to be normal. God, how can he? And I'm so scared of merging. I never want it to happen. I'd do anything to keep it from happening."

"Yet you called him forth on purpose," Severus reminded.

Harry winced. "Yeah. I did. Seraphim isn't me. He can't be trusted completely, but he isn't a monster. I see that now. He's just irrevocably damaged. I knew he could save Neville. Hell, he even saved you. He's powerful. He can survive where I would not. I know that. I accept it. It would be stupid, as Draco has said many times, not to make use of that if the situation calls for it, but I'm afraid that little acceptance is just the first step. Severus, I can't be him. I can't!"

Severus met his son's eyes and internally winced at the look of fear and desperation in the pale emerald gaze. "I will help you."
It wasn't much, but Harry seemed to take comfort from it. His shoulders relaxed and his expression softened. "Good," he whispered tightly, trying to grab hold of his self-control. "That's good."

Severus again reached forward to squeeze his son's leg, wishing he could offer something more to comfort him.

Harry smiled up at him weakly. "I talked to Draco about him and Seraphim. He still insists he can't _not_ love Seraphim, but he says that he only loves me in a sexual manner. The Black magic invokes those feelings he has for me. He can't control it and doesn't ask for it."

"Does that make you feel more comfortable with what happened?"

"I did." Harry sighed, running his good hand through his hair. "But after letting Seraphim come forward again…"

"What?" Severus encouraged.

"He gathered his pack and my pack together, to keep them safe. We can't talk in my head to each other, not like I sometimes could with my other alters, but when we sleep, we do communicate a bit. Our dreams sometimes connect, probably because we act as each other's subconscious and dreams occur in the subconscious. I got across the point that if he protects what is mine, I wouldn't force him down so hard."

"I see. What is the problem then? He did as you wanted. He protected all of us."

Harry grimaced. "He sees it as his pack and my pack. Draco and Marissa are his. You and Neville are mine."

Severus felt understanding dawn.

"I kind of see it that way myself," Harry admitted guiltily. "Marissa is Seraphim's. Not mine. I like her. I worry about her, but I don't really feel like she belongs with me."

"You don't like him claiming Draco."

"I _hate_ it."

"Why?" Severus asked carefully, aware of how sensitive this topic was.

"God, I can't even count all the reasons why I hate it so much. I hate that Draco thinks that insane lunatic is me. I hate that he sees me that way. I hate the fact that Seraphim needs him, marked him. I hate the fact that Draco experiences things with him I don't fully understand. Most of all, I hate that I can't just tell him not to be around Seraphim anymore. It's too late and Draco would never agree. I hate that he wants to help make Seraphim better because I hate how much he cares about my alter. I want him to be on my side, to help me stand against Seraphim, so I won't feel so alone. It hurts."

"Harry…" Severus murmured, heart clenching in sympathy.

"I need to talk about something," the teen interrupted. His face was pale in the white light, his eyes solemn and dark. "First, though, I need your word that what I'm about to tell you won't change how you treat Draco."

Severus hesitated. The request for such a promise told him much. He obviously would feel anger toward his Slytherin for whatever was about to be said. He didn't want to give his word. If Draco had done something that upset Shadow, he wanted to be able to confront the blond and make him
see sense, but Severus reminded himself that Draco was just a boy himself, dealing with things way beyond him to the best of his ability.

"Very well. I give you my word."

Harry nodded, trusting his father to be able to separate his behavior later from the conversation now. Severus was a master of masks, after all, and was a master of his own mind. "I love Draco. I love the fact that he's always there for me. The way he helps me plan and stands beside me in battle. I love the way he helps me relax and forget the world for a little while. Draco makes my life fun. He makes me laugh. I need him as much as I love him."

Severus understood that feeling well. He had also needed Amalia. To help him, to make the world less dark, to bring him outside himself, to make life bearable; he had needed her to do this. The love he held for her had been made deeper because she had stepped up and given him what he needed willingly, despite the difficulty it added to her own life. The bond between them had been unbreakable because of that. Even now when she wasn't alive, he was bound to her through that bond. It was a love that very few truly experienced. He was both sad and grateful that his son had that kind of love. Sad because of the circumstances that broke a person wide open in able to form that kind of love and happy because it was the strongest love one could feel outside of the bond between parent and child.

"I want him. He's beautiful and I'm a teenager. I'm driven by my hormones. I know that," Harry admitted with a blush. "But mentally and emotionally, I'm all tangled up inside. When we mess around, it's wonderful as I've told you, but afterward it terrifies me. That I'm letting him get so close, that I'm allowing myself to feel so good. It really scares me."

"In time, you will overcome that learned fear," Severus tried to reassure him.

"Just listen," Harry said quietly, eyes on his lap once again. "Please. This is hard enough to talk about."

"I'm sorry. Go ahead."

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. "He confronted me about how I hate him with Seraphim. We fought. Physically," he drawled with a wry smile as he remembered their brawl in Hogwarts and Severus's disapproval. The humor slipped away, though, as he remembered what else had happened. "We talked, but we always end up in a standstill. Him saying he loves me and would rather be with me, but also saying he enjoys helping Seraphim and that it felt good when they came together."

"They had sex?" Severus asked sharply, shocked. He hadn't heard about this.

"I don't know what exactly happened," Harry admitted, covering his face. "But I know it was the equivalent of sex and Black magic was involved, making it feel mind-blowing as Draco described it."

"Did he?" the Potions Master drawled darkly, his black eyes narrowed.

"He did, but only because I forced him to tell me. He insisted it wasn't like it is when we mess around. He says that the magic overpowers him, makes him lose all control over himself, but when we kiss and stuff it's us together. Does that make sense?"

Severus frowned.

Harry saw the expression. "Yeah. I feared the same thing. I asked if Seraphim raped him. Draco insisted that he hadn't. Seraphim started it and Draco couldn't stop it, but he knew Seraphim wouldn't
hurt him and he loves the alter as much as he loves me, so it wasn't rape."

"I see," Severus murmured, but he suddenly realized that he didn't. There was no way to truly understand what Draco had gone through, what it was like. He was suddenly very aware that not even his imagination could conjure up even a sketch of what that situation had been like.

Harry took another deep breath. "We had been fighting and I felt so raw. One thing led to another and we were kissing. Nothing was better really, but I love him. Things got heated as it always does with us. We lose control, but he keeps me with him when the… pleasure gets to much." Harry was bright red with embarrassment, but he had to get this out. "I enjoy it. I do. I love the way he looks. I love the way I can make him gasp and squirm. I love making him feel good. I love the fact that he understands and knows what to do to keep me there with him and not slip away into the past or my fear."

"What are you trying to say?" Severus frowned. His son rarely repeated himself, but he was doing so now, so he must be trying to work himself up to something. "It's okay. You can tell me."

"It's just everything goes so fast. Everything falls away. I forget all my issues and it's wonderful, but afterward…"

"Were you upset?"

"We went farther than ever before…" Harry bit his lip hard, his hands fisting on his thighs. "I hate that I feel like this afterward. This fear. It's not normal. I should be able to be with him without having mental convulsions afterward."

"Did you have sex?" Severus asked in a whisper, his fingers going numb as shock spread through his system. Draco damn well knew better than that. Harry wasn't ready by any means to go that far!

Harry was caught up in the memories of that moment. He'd been so hot and he'd needed Draco so badly. He'd been shocked when Draco slipped his finger inside him, but the bites on his neck and collarbone kept the fear away and it felt so damn right. Felt even better when Draco added a second finger and it hurt that little bit. Draco had consumed him then.

The smell of him, the feel of him all along his body, the sharp sparks of pleasure and that anchoring sting, knowing Draco was inside him, enthralled by him. Nothing and no one existed but them. His body had taken over and he'd fucked Draco's fingers and loved it, but it'd been overwhelming. He couldn't handle it when he was calm-headed and that drove him crazy.

As much as he hated it, he knew he wasn't ready for that kind of intimacy, even with Draco. It was maddening because he needed it as much as he feared it. This was the first time he'd allowed himself to really think about it since then. It sent his heart racing. He fought to breathe past the panic. God, had he really done that? Draco had been inside of him!

"No. We didn't have sex," Harry finally rasped. "But it was close." He took a deep breath and tried to put it into words. "I needed it because Seraphim had been with him. I don't want Draco to only be with my alter. I want him to want me, to be with me. I love the way he focuses on me. When we're together, I'm all he can see and think about. I get inside him as much as he does me and I love that, but it's too much afterward. I feel like fainting in shock that that was me. It's like I'm different when he touches me. I'm not breaking into alters or anything, but I hate the disassociation. It's too familiar. It scares me more."

"You should definitely talk to him. Or I can," Severus offered in an even tone, keeping his anger tightly trapped inside. "Your relationship is a good one. You both sincerely love each other, but
physical intimacy should be approached carefully to prevent problems. He'd be upset to know you felt this way."

"I know," Harry admitted, pulling his knees up to his chest. "That's why I don't want to tell him. It's humiliating, and I don't want him to blame himself. It's not his fault I'm messed up. I could tell him to wait, to stop, and I don't."

"You should never feel ashamed of how you feel, Harry," Severus said firmly, black eyes flashing. "You are who you are. Honesty is the only way through this thicket. You know that."

Harry nodded. "I know. I just don't know what I'm going to tell him. I don't want to stop being with him. I like it." He sighed tiredly. "The first time we made out he freaked a bit, worried he hurt me or went too fast. I hated that. I really liked being with him and he was making me feel like maybe I should be upset, but I didn't want to be upset because for the first time I felt like a normal teenager. It was great." He expelled a loud puff of air. "God, why is everything so damn complicated?"

Severus shifted, moving across the tunnel so that he was sitting beside his son, and wrapped an arm across his shoulders, pulling him into his side. "Things are complicated because life is complicated. I promise you that everyone else suffers from their own complexities as you do. However, you are unique in the fact that you work hard to smooth out the complications as much as possible instead of ignoring them or making it worse."

Harry leaned against his father's warmth. "I feel so stupid worrying about all this when there's a war going on. We might not even survive and I'm worried about my sex life."

"I am very proud of you," Severus responded. "You acknowledge the importance of your own feelings and needs and don't allow the war to overshadow them. As for your relationship, Draco will understand. He is young as you are. I'm sure that he himself isn't quite ready to go that far, either. I'm sure he feels just as overwhelmed."

"Really?" Harry perked up, eyes brightening.

"Yes. You are both fifteen. That is still young. The intimacy of sex can be overwhelming to anyone. Granted you two have been through a lot, so your level of trust is strong and deep, but it is still a big step."

Harry smiled and leaned his head against his father's shoulder. He felt pleasantly drained. The issues and fears that had worked below the surface had been released. For the first time in a while, he was quiet from the inside out.

"Rest. It should only be a few more hours," Severus murmured gently as his fingers carded through his son's dirty hair. He smiled when he felt Harry's weight grow heavier against his side and the teen's breathing even out in sleep.

Chapter end.
Bellatrix crawled forward. The marble under her hands and knees was chilled despite the blazing torches all along the hall. Red eyes pierced through her back as she crossed the long distance to the single throne-like chair and the being resting in its embrace.

"Dear Bella…"

The sibilant voice shivered through her and she felt herself get wet between her legs. "My Lord… Master…” she whimpered needily.

"What news has you crawling, Bella?"

"The goblins fire-called, Master," she rasped, shaking. "My vault, my Lord, it was pilfered by Draco, now a Black, and two guards that matched the description of Severus Snape and Remus Lupin."

She heard the rustling of robes and stared in horror and awe as her Lord stood and walked down toward her, terrible magic swelling around him in a dark wave.

"Tell me everything."

Gasping, trembling on the verge of orgasm as sweet Dark magic filled the room, she breathlessly obeyed. "Draco claimed to need access to the Black vaults. As heir, he was admitted. The goblin was Imperioed, Master, at the last moment to open the Lestrange vault instead. Nothing was taken except your chalice, my Lord."

"Do they live?" Voldemort whispered malevolently, his fingers entwining in her long dark hair. His wrist snapped back and she cried out as her head was violently lifted and their eyes met.

"Snape is presumed dead, Master. Draco and Lupin escaped upon a dragon. Gringotts has been searched thoroughly. Neither the chalice nor Snape can be found within the depths, my Lord."

Voldemort began to vibrate with rage. The air around him writhed and twisted. Bellatrix was yanked to her knees by the punishing hand in her hair and she cried out in ecstasy as pain tore through her body.

xXx

When Monday morning rolled around and Neville still hadn't returned to the tower, Ginny really began to worry. She hurried to her brother's dorm room. Dean and Seamus cried out in shock, diving for their beds as she walked in on them getting dressed.

"Sorry. Just need to talk to Ron. I'll be quick," she said with a grin.

"Don't you know how to knock?" Dean demanded hotly.

She ignored him and shook her still sleeping brother's shoulder. "Ron. Ron, wake up."

"What's it?" Ron slurred groggily.

"I need the map," Ginny said quietly, not wanting the others to hear.
"What for?" Ron sat up, rubbing a hand through his short hair.

"Just give it to me. I'll give it back at the DA meeting. Come on, Ron," she insisted impatiently.

Grumbling, the redhead crawled out of bed and unlocked his trunk. He handed over the seemingly blank parchment with a scowl. Ginny smiled at him and kissed his cheek before darting back out the door with another apology to the half-dressed boys. She had the map activated before she was even outside the Fat Lady's portrait. When she found Neville's dot in a courtyard with Luna Lovegood, her teeth clenched.

Neville had been keeping her at arms length since he'd gotten back. She didn't understand it, but she'd tried to give him space. Now he was with Luna. If he needed space, what was he doing with her? Why her and not Ginny? Her temper grew hotter the closer to the courtyard she came. By the time she opened the door and stepped out into the cold morning, she was so mad she could hardly see straight.

Her tirade was stopped before it began however when she found Luna asleep against a tree with no Neville in sight. Scowling down at the map, she confirmed she was in the right place. Ginny huffed and slammed the map away. Stomping up to Luna, she shook the petite girl's shoulder. Large blue eyes blinked open and stared up at her. Ginny waited with arms crossed, but the blonde just sat there, watching her. The oak tree rustled in the wind.

"Well?" she demanded loudly.

"Good morning, Ginny," Luna responded with a smile.

"Where is he?" Ginny hissed. "Did he hear me coming? Did you hide him? Don't bother. I know he's here."

"We're waiting out the snorkblasts." Luna stood and brushed off her wrinkled robes. Her eyes drifted around the courtyard, squinting as she looked for something. "There's still a few watching us."

"Oh cut it out!" Ginny flung her arms out and stomped her foot. "Where's Neville? He's my boyfriend, remember?"

Luna offered her hand to the redheaded girl. "I'll show you," she said with a dreamy little smile.

Ginny scoffed at the offered hand and gestured for Luna to precede her.

Luna shrugged and skipped back toward the door. She disappeared into Hogwarts. Ginny frowned. The map had clearly stated Neville was in the courtyard. She glanced around once more but saw no one. Huffing, she followed the crazy Ravenclaw back inside. She would get her answers, no matter what it took.

Luna was waiting for her, leaning against the wall, twiddling her wand in her hand.

"Well? Where is he?" Ginny demanded again.

Luna cast privacy spells around them, her face becoming unusually serious. "He could hear you. Your anger doesn't help him."

"Don't tell me what's helpful! You're always hanging all over him! He said he needs space!"

"He needs space from the event of his nightmares," Luna agreed, "but not from his friends. It hurts him when he is alone with the memories. Try to put yourself in his head, so you can understand."
Ginny's eyes were wide by this point. "I try! You have no idea what it's like! I try to help him and he just pushes me away!"

"You don't understand because you've never faced your darkness. You push it away and expect him to do the same. He needs to face it to truly heal."

"What are you talking about?" Ginny rasped, panting she was so mad.

"Your head was Riddled with darkness. You were made to do things. Bad things. You hate what was done to you, yet you were able to put it aside with the promise of vengeance," Luna explained gently.

"How do you know about that?" Ginny wrapped her arms around her chest, eyes burning with fury. "Did he tell you? I bet he tells you everything," she added bitterly.

"You're not listening." Luna stomped her foot. "This isn't about you. This is about Neville right now."

Ginny turned away and faced the courtyard door, trembling with rage.

"So young," Luna sighed with tears in her eyes. "The red warrior determined to prove her strength, to lead an army… You want a partner to stand beside you, to thrill in the battle. A partner who can also keep you soft, to touch your heart. The Childe of Earth is strong. He has tasted battle twice and his heart is still warm, but he does not thrill to the cry of battle. He does what he must as is the natural progression of seasons. Slow, deliberate, the Childe holds to his experiences and grows slowly from them. The battles become a part of him, another layer to his age rings."

Ginny stared at her like she was from another planet. She didn't understand what Loony was saying.

Desperate, Luna tried another approach. "Fire. You burn bright and hard and fast. You let your experiences fuel you, push you forward, make you burn hotter. You push out; the Childe pulls inward. His darkness deepens him. Your heat burns him, hurts him. It is not good this way. You need to temper your blaze or the forest will burn."

"You're crazy," Ginny sated with absolute surety.

"Sanity is hard to grasp when light is shone on the dark spaces between the stars," Luna admitted sorrowfully. She turned away and left Ginny there, humming Twinkle Twinkle Little Star under her breath.

Ginny scowled and returned to the courtyard. It was still empty. Angry, frustrated, and hurt, she spun around and kicked the oak tree. "Neville! Merlin, I don't understand you, she's got that right! Look, you don't want to talk about what happened, I'm not going to make you, but you could talk to me about you. I care about you. I want to help, but you won't let me in!" She covered her face with her hands and sighed. "I'm crazy. Talking to myself."

She lifted her head and looked around. When the courtyard was still empty, she sighed again. "If you really can hear me, Nev, I'm going to get ready for the DA meeting. It's during lunch, so come by if you want to see me. Luna is right about that, too. I want to be ready. I want to fight in this war…"

Her voice softened. "I hope you can understand. I'm sorry I'm not what you need me to be and I'm glad you have Luna if she makes you feel better."

Ginny turned and walked away, the whispery sound of leaves rustling in the wind filling her ears.

xXx
Draco limped into the Chamber of Secrets with Remus staggering after them. He thanked Merlin for the charm Shadow and he had made to let him into the Chamber. If he'd had to hike one more mile through the Forbidden Forest looking for the outside passage of the Chamber, he was going to scream.

The burns on his legs and arms hurt. He thought it would slowly fade over time, but the searing sting remained maddeningly steady. His hands were shredded from holding onto that blasted dragon’s scales all night long. He was sweaty, filthy, and starving. Worse, he was worried about Shadow and the damned cup weighed heavily on his mind.

"Let me tend your wounds," Remus rasped. He wasn't fairing much better than Draco, but being a werewolf his tolerance for pain gave him advantages the teenager lacked.

"Cup first." Draco strode through the hall and toward the basilisk corpse and the trunk with the harvested fangs. "Need your help. Make sure I don't get sucked in."

"Sucked in?" Remus didn't like the sound of that and followed the exhausted Slytherin worriedly. "Let me do it."

Draco actually considered that. Success before pride at this point. He couldn't mess around. Too much depended on him making the right decision. He took stock of his condition and frowned as the aches, pains, and exhaustion fully registered.

"Fine." He placed the cup on the ground and handed Remus a long fang. "Stab it as hard and quickly as you can. I'll cast Fiendfyre as soon as you do, just to make sure."

"Fiendfyre?" Remus was shocked. That was a very destructive Dark spell.

"Just do it," Draco snapped.

Shaking himself, Remus raised the fang and approached the golden chalice. His eyes caught on the beautiful way the light hit the metal, the way it sparkled. He could imagine the taste of water drunk from the cup. The purest water, of clean woods and sparkling rivers. It would be a shame not to try it first before destroying it. It was a priceless heirloom of their culture, of Hogwarts…

"Remus!" Draco yelled, cursing himself. He shouldn't have given the fang over. "DO IT NOW! Don't listen to it!"

The werewolf swayed, confused. He shook his head and whined. Compelled, he reached out with his empty hand. Just to touch it once. Draco had held it all this time. He deserved a chance to touch it as well.

"REMUS! Kill it! It's the Dark Lord talking to you!" Draco cursed when he was ignored again. "Do it for Shadow! For Harry! Voldemort tried to kill him! He tortured him! Remember? You had to piece him together again! REMEMBER!"

Remus jerked as if slapped. His eyes bled gold and he roared as he stabbed downward, the fang miraculously piercing the gold metal. A horrid scream pierced the air and he jumped backward as the cup ignited in violet fire. A shriek sounded as the cup exploded.

Draco fell to his knees, the last of his energy gone with the casting of that spell. He groaned as he fell sideways and darkness swallowed him whole.

xXx
Carrow slipped her head out of the floo and stood with a delighted smile upon her face. She'd just received her orders and they were glorious. She had waited, bided her time, but now she no longer had to restrain herself.

Giddy, she shuffled out of her office. It was lunch time. She made her way to the Great Hall. Her three favorites instantly lifted their heads. She nodded and they stood and followed her back out into the school corridors. She laughed and made her way toward her ignorant ally.

"Professor Carrow, how can I help you?" Umbridge asked, looking up from the paperwork she was working on.

"I believe I can help you, Dolores," Carrow said darkly, a tainted smile twisting her face.

"Oh?" Umbridge stood and looked at the three Slytherins behind the ugly woman.

"These young people just brought to my attention a despicable thing." Carrow turned her eyes on the teenagers. "Tell her what you've discovered about the Headmistress's plot."

Umbridge straightened, her eyes becoming hungry at these words.

Theodore Knott Jr. stepped slightly forward. "We've had our suspicions. A large group of the student population disappears at strange hours. Suspicious, we made it our task to discover what is happening."

"And?" Umbridge snapped, leaning forward.

"We found them gathering at a hidden room," Pansy Parkinson answered, her eyes wide with false shock. "Marietta Edgecombe pointed us in the right direction to get answers. Padma Patil revealed there is a student army preparing to support the Headmistress's Order and overcome the Ministry."

"Are you certain?" Umbridge came around her desk and practically grabbed hold of her.

Julian Montague nodded, drawing her attention as he handed her a scroll. "We have Patil's confession in writing. She consented to the use of Veritaserum, of course. She revealed they practice questionable Dark spells and regularly denounce the Ministry's capabilities."

Umbridge snatched the scroll and read it hungrily. As her eyes flew over the damning words, her smile grew larger and larger. Finally, she looked up. "You have all done well. Such service toward the Ministry will be remembered."

"Thank you," they murmured, eyes downcast humbly as Carrow looked on with voracious pride.

"I believe Minister Scrimgeour needs to be alerted." Umbridge gave a delighted laugh. McGonagall had crossed her for the last time.

xXx

Harry crawled forward on hands and knees and even so his back scrapped along the tunnel’s ceiling. His wand held securely between his teeth cast the only illumination in the perfect darkness deep within the earth. He appeared to be alone but his father was in front of him under the invisibility cloak.

Harry had finally talked Severus into wearing the garment with the argument that the goblins would immediately attack him upon sight, but they might hesitate when faced with Harry Potter. He'd been covered the whole time, so no one should suspect his involvement in the break in. As a compromise,
he allowed Severus to go before him, shielding him with his body should the worst happen and they were discovered.

After crawling around, however, for what felt like weeks, he was about ready to purposely get caught. Cold sweat broke out upon his brow and he fought against the panic attack by forcing his thoughts onto other things. Like magic. It was a bitch, but the earth muffled magic since it was saturated in so much of its own Nature magic. Wizarding magic was simply overwhelmed. It was like there was static interference scrambling any spell, making their magic too unreliable to use. This explained Neville's difficulties with wand magic.

Had magic been more available, Harry would have cast the Far-Seeing spell he'd been taught by Corwin to help them navigate their way through the tunnels or Severus could have transformed into a bat and scouted ahead. They were lucky that the Lumos Charm worked even a little bit at this depth.

Harry turned a corner and saw through his invisible father another rounded dead end. Harry's breath came whooshing in with a gasp of horror. The panic he'd held at bay all this time broke over him in an uncontrollable flood. Walls pressed in from all sides, dark shadows jumped with the unsteady light, musty smell smothering him with too thin air... He couldn't take it and snapped.

"Let me out, let me out, let me out!" he screamed with utter desperation. His wand fell to the dirt floor of the tunnel and rolled forward, the tip still flickering like a Muggle sparkler. Wild, crazed, Harry flailed, hyperventilating.

Severus flung off the cloak and grabbed for his son. "Be calm. We will get through this."

"Can't breathe!" Harry rasped, eyes large in his pale face. "Need air!"

"There is plenty of air," Severus barked firmly. "Shadow! Be still!"

Harry thrashed in his grasp, utterly panicked now. There was no reasoning with him. The teen arched in his grasp and screamed a thready scream, his lungs seizing.

Severus reached into the pack he'd been carrying and searched for a vial as he tried to keep his son from damaging himself further in his distress. His fingers came in contact with unbreakable glass and he pulled the vial free. Light blue. Perfect. He unstoppered the precious liquid and wrestled Harry to the floor. Within minutes, the Calming Draught began to work and the teenager's spastic flailing slowed as Harry's terror turned into exhausted sobs.


Harry could hardly think straight. The fear was still stalking the edges of his mind, ready to consume him once again as soon as the potion wore off. "Can't do this," he muttered weakly. "Lost. We're lost down here. Never get out."

"Stop it!" Severus snarled. "We will get free. We just have to use our heads."

"How can you be so calm?"

Severus sighed and leaned back against the slightly rounded wall of the tunnel. His whole body ached from the crouched positions he'd been forced in since their exploration began. They'd looked for the way out for at least ten hours. If he were honest, he did feel a certain horror at the thought of being left down here to die, body unfound for eternity.

"I am calm because there is nothing to fear. We will find a way out. If it comes down to it, I will turn myself in, but I am not yet prepared for such a dire course of action." He kept his voice even,
betraying none of his true fears. He was calm simply because he had to be. Having Shadow to take care of and worry about gave him the strength to remain cool and collected. "Stay still. I'm going to crawl over you. We'll back track to that last branching point."

Harry screwed his eyes shut tight, his throat tightening again as Severus pressed down on him to get across. He couldn't stand the feeling of being smothered. He was about ready to go mad if he didn't get out of here soon. Please, soon, he pleaded in his mind, uncaring how pathetic he was being. He was falling apart and had nothing left to hold himself together. Seraphim was right under the surface, but the alter didn't really want to come Out.

It surprised Harry. He'd have thought Seraphim would jump at the chance to come Out again and guessed the promise of weakened magic and the tight quarters were enough to discourage even his alter. He had a feeling there was more to Seraphim's reluctance than that, but he didn't have the patience or inclination to try and figure it out. He was more than happy to give Seraphim what he wanted and keep him as far under as he could. Even if it meant enduring this hellish situation.

"Let us go. Come on, Shadow," Severus coaxed as soon as he was clear of the trembling teen.

Harry curled up, trying to find the inner fortitude to continue this madness. He was starving, quite literally. His tongue was rough and dry, his lips cracked, his head pounding with dehydration. The certainty that they were going to die down here was growing with every hour that passed.

Severus could sense the mental edge his son was standing upon. Shadow was very near his true breaking point. "We'll search one more tunnel before we call it quits. I'm asking you to trust me."

"Go on then!" Harry yelled, voice hoarse. "Go!"

Severus pulled the cloak back on and hurried onward, not daring to question his good fortune. He needed Shadow to keep moving. If that meant encouraging anger, then so be it. He just preyed his calculations weren't completely off. It was so easy to get turned around in these blasted, spell-resistant tunnels. He was certain a way out was close by, if only they could find the godforsaken thing!

He was so concentrated on listening to Shadow's strained breathing that at first he didn't realize what he was feeling. Through the thin cloak he could feel the faintest puff of cool air. Heart racing, he picked up the pace, his knees protesting. Sweat rolled down his face, but all he cared about was finding the source of that faint, fresh breeze.

Harry's head lifted as cool air brushed across his grimy, sticky face. Eyes widening, he jerked forward, utterly desperate. He was so anxious to escape, he forgot about his father and crashed into his back. They fell together in a tangle of limbs. Harry cried out and fought viciously to be free. He shot forward, losing half his shirt as it was ripped from Severus's grip.

Severus cursed as he lost his hold on his son. The boy scrambled recklessly down the tunnel, oblivious to the danger in his mad quest to get out. He hurried after the teenager, but he was older, stiffer. Terrified Shadow would run into trouble, he pushed himself forward even as his muscles spasmed with deep cramps. He turned a corner and found himself at the mouth of the tunnel, which opened up into a huge chamber lined with cart tracks.

Standing for the first time in uncountable hours, Severus creaked and popped. Shadow was leaning against the wall, gulping in the fresher air, still trembling from the ordeal. Severus clasped his shoulder warmly, making the teen jump. Bending low, he brought his mouth near his ear and whispered encouraging words.
Harry slowly relaxed and leaned into his side, visibly pulling himself together. "I'm okay. Sorry about that. I really lost it."

"You did well. We are free; that's all that matters." Severus paused briefly. "Are you ready to continue?"

Harry nodded. "I'm ready." The plan was simple. He would bluff his way out of Gringotts. They weren't after Harry Potter, after all. Severus would stick to him like glue, safe under the cloak. Once they were outside, they'd Apparate back to Grimmauld Place. He straightened his spine and studied the large chamber. The ground slopped gently upward to the left, so he turned that way.

His nerves were shot; his muscles knotted under his skin. He expected to be discovered at any moment. As the minutes stretched out and he saw not a single goblin or wizard, he became more tense not less. Where were the guards? Where were the carts that always moved to and fro with patrons of the bank and the goblin workers? Was it after hours? Was the bank closed? So many questions and he had no way of knowing the answers.

They marched for hours. A trip that would have taken minutes in the cart took much more time on foot. Harry was beginning to feel faint from hunger and thirst when the large golden doors came into sight. Letting out a grateful sigh, Harry stumbled forward, wondering desperately how he was going to open the massive things.

Shoving on them had no effect whatsoever. Stepping back, he lifted his wand and gathered his magic. He was no Seraphim, but he wasn't a slouch when it came to magic, either. Mind focused, he held the spell he wanted, letting the magic build up. When he could hold it no longer, he yelled a Blasting Curse.

There was a loud BOOM, as if a great battering ram had hit the golden surface. The massive doors were jarred open a few inches. Roared battle cries and shouts of pain and anger filled the normally elegant chamber, echoing like demented thunder. They slipped through the small opening carefully.

Figures dressed in the new robes worn by the Order of the Phoenix battled goblins and Gringotts wizards. A flash of light to the right caught his attention. Griphook jumped into the air, the once sword of Gryffindor glowing. The mighty weapon swung down and almost severed the hapless Order member in half. Harry took a step forward, instinctively moving to defend the Phoenix members, but a hand clapped down on his shoulder, the long nails almost piercing his skin.

"They are not of the Order," Severus's voice hissed in his ear as he pulled his son back against the wall. "I do not know what is happening, but we need to leave before we are noticed! Quickly, change into your Animagus form."

"How do you know it's not them?" Harry demanded, but he began to change obediently without waiting for the answer.

"The spells. This is not the work of our allies."

Now that Severus mentioned it, Harry realized the supposed Order members were using surprisingly vicious and Dark spells. Confused, he loped across the marble chamber, sensuously slipping around the violently dancing mass. He sped up, now almost running, only to find that the battle was even more fierce on the front doorstep.

A seething mass of humanity and goblins struggled in the dwindling light as the sun slowly sank below the horizon. Suddenly a successive series of Blasting Curses erupted from behind him, shooting over his head, briefly clearing a path on the stairs. Harry darted through. One gnarled hand
reached for him, but he slashed out with his sharp claws and the elder wizard jerked away with a shriek of pain. Twice he lost his footing on the blood-slicked marble and almost went down.

Cries of recognition went up and the battle shifted as the imposters almost eagerly turned toward him instead of the goblins. He wouldn't have made it if it weren't for Severus who lashed out at the crowd with a spell that left a trail like a whip through the air. As soon as he was out from underneath the anti-Apparation wards, he transformed back into his human form and disappeared.

Harry landed across the street from Grimmauld Place, the sky rapidly darkening. His legs folded under him and he barely had enough coherence to put out his arms to break his fall as darkness swept in over his head.

Severus appeared beside him and fell to his knees, panting. Dehydrated, starving, he almost followed Shadow into unconsciousness. Head hanging, he regulated his breathing and carefully shifted so that he was sitting up right so that he could fire off a Patronus message toward headquarters. The spell took the last of his energy and he crumpled sideways, his body collapsing protectively over his son.

xXx

Minister Scrimgeour walked slowly up the path toward Hogwarts. His hands were folded behind his back, his face cold and empty of all emotion. Behind him walked five Aurors. They tried to mimic their leader's pose, but exhaustion and anger simmered around their edges. The morning was cool as dawn broke. Rufus appreciated the long walk. It cleared his head, gave him a chance to reexamine the chaos of the world.

Slowly, the grand castle came into view. The path they had walked wound gently over hills, skirted the looming Black forest to the right while down to the left the lake shimmered as light struck the still waters. It brought back memories, Hogwarts did, but the darkness of the previous night instilled an ominous sense to the otherwise peaceful scene.

Before he was ready, they were at the front doors. Rufus brought up a fist and brought it down twice on the large doors. He was not surprised when they opened immediately, Headmistress McGonagall herself standing just inside. She mirrored his acknowledging nod as they faced one another. The Aurors behind him tensed. Her eyes narrowed at this, but he offered her no explanation.

After brief greetings, they walked silently back to her office. The trip was fraught with tension that seemingly left the elder witch unaffected. Rufus could admire that kind of internal strength. When they arrived, he left the Aurors at the base of the Headmaster's tower beside the protective gargoyle. He ignored the disapproving looks they shot him.

The office was different from the time Dippit had been the occupant and he assumed different from the time Dumbledore had. The neat rows of instruments and the placement of the furniture made maximum use of the available space reflecting McGonagall's efficient, no-nonsense personality.

"To what do I owe your company, Minister?" Minerva asked, her hands folded as she sat behind her desk.

"I bring unfortunate news," he rumbled, hands clasped at his back once again. "Last evening the Ministry was attacked by Death Eaters. Simultaneously, Gringotts was attacked by the Order of the Phoenix. The Wizengamot has banned you from its ranks, as well as removed you from your position as Headmistress of Hogwarts. I am here to temporarily instate Miss Dolores Umbridge as Headmistress in your place."

Minerva remained calm, her expression unsurprised.
He pressed on, face blank. "Your connection to the Order is well known. I must insist you turn over a list of every member. We will uncover whether a small portion went rogue and turned to the Dark or if the Order as a whole is guilty of treason. If the former is proven and you are found innocent of the attack on Gringotts, you will be returned to all your former positions. Regardless, the Order will be henceforth disbanded and its members will report to MLE to be evaluated."

"I see." Minerva stood. "You realize that by removing me, you open this school up to attack."

"I'm afraid the situation has left me no other choice." Rufus gestured to the fireplace. "Call Miss Umbridge up here, please, so that I may inform her officially of her promotion."

xXx

Draco woke in a cold sweat. The bandages on his wounds told him he'd been treated and placed in bed. A quick swish of his wand told him it was an early seven in the morning. Still, something was happening. Tension was thick in the air. Pulling on slacks, shirt, and a school robe, he turned toward his door, planning on finding out what was going on. He froze in shock before ever taking a step. The Gryffindor phantom stood in front of him. Normally, the brown-haired teen wore a serious expression reminiscent of Percy, but now Draco was faced with a fierce expression he expected from the original Gryffindor.

Hazel eyes blazed as Godric lifted his sword-calloused hands. A curtain of light grew almost organically between his palms, threads of magic so delicate and intricate Draco could only stare. He quickly realized he was being shown the entrance of Hogwarts. McGonagall was being led off by a group of Aurors. Minister Scrimgeour bowed to Umbridge, who stood triumphantly.

"She is the new Headmistress, but Hogwarts does not recognize her," Godric grated angrily. "She will be given minimal access to the wards. The rest shall be entrusted to you with my overseeing."

Draco's mouth fell open. What?

The scene depicted by the miniature ward in Godric's hands - Draco didn't even know such wards were possible! - changed to show Umbridge stalking through the corridors. Her first stop was the Divination tower where Trelawney was evicted. Her second stop was classroom eleven where Firenze was obviously sacked. Next she went to the teachers' wing and sacked Flitwick. She still had a single letter of dismissal. Draco could clearly read Rubeus Hagrid on the scroll when Godric zoomed in.

"Is there nothing I can do?" he demanded.

"You can bring them down here to the Chamber or you can let them go. Umbridge has enough control of the wards to know of their presence in the castle otherwise. As you know, the Chamber is defended by an independent set of wards that are not linked to my control. The only reason I or the other phantoms besides Salazar are able to come down here is because Potter-Snape invited us."

Draco considered, but decided the few who knew about the Chamber the better. It was still Shadow's home base, so to speak. A thought slowly dawned on him. "She's going to have to replace those teachers."

Hazel eyes stared steadily back at him. The scene between his palms shifted once more. Umbridge was settling in to her new office with Carrow standing before her. The sadistic Death Eater was talking and Umbridge nodded before flicking her hand in dismissal.

"She's going to bring in more Death Eaters," Draco whispered, horrified. Resolve flowed through
him. "I need to know all the ways in and out of the castle. Both conventional and non-conventional."

Godric broke the delicate ward he held and created a new one. A three dimensional, see-through sketch of Hogwarts rotated on his palm. In a clipped voice, the phantom pointed out every means of access obediently. The blond memorized everything, ideas simmering at the back of his mind as he listened.

"Wait… What's this?" he pointed to the highlighted Room of Requirement.

"You must request a room to hide things in and the Room will provide a place filled with items. To the right, there will be a cabinet that is magically linked to a second. Go through one, out the other. Similar to the cupboards you and Potter-Snape spelled between the Chamber and Slytherin Rogan Harper's dorm."

"Where is the second?"

"The Hog's Head," Godric answered, "in the care of Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore!" Draco exclaimed.

"Albus's younger brother Aberforth."

"I see." Draco glared thoughtfully at the rotating miniature castle. "Do you possibly have a way to indicate where powerful magical artifacts are located?"

Godric said nothing for a minute, instead studying the young man before him. "I know what you wish me to divulge, but I cannot."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, they needed the damn diadem, but Godric shook his head once sharply.

"However, since we're at war and the castle is functioning on high alert I will give you advice as is my duty. Talk to the ghosts of Slytherin and Ravenclaw."

"Thank you." Draco inclined his head. He was frustrated, but he knew better than to anger a powerful ally. "May I ask why you chose me?"

"I did not. The true Headmistress instructed me to seek out one who will be safe from Umbridge and the invaders. That left me two choices; you or Professor Lupin as you both reside in the only place within this castle that is out of Umbridge's reach. Of the two of you, you are the most powerful."

Draco blinked at that. He was skilled, yes, but when it came to sheer magical strength he was pretty sure Remus bested him by a fair margin. After all, Draco hadn't gone through his majority yet. His magic was still growing.

"Wandless, the professor may outrank you power-wise, but with wands you definitely possess the superior strength."

Draco looked down at the wand he held.

"Not that one," Godric snapped impatiently. "The Elder Wand."

Becoming annoyed, Draco crossed his arms over his chest and lifted an eyebrow. Godric almost snarled in equal frustration. "You bested the former Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. His wand, the Elder Wand, is now yours."
"It was entombed with him," Draco protested.

"You can summon it."

"How?"

"You simply summon it!" Godric snapped. "Call for me if you have need."

Draco sneered as the phantom disappeared. Still, it was worth a try. "Accio Elder Wand," he cast and was shocked when a long wand slapped into his palm, appearing as if from thin air.

Draco gasped as power thrummed up his arm and into his body. Warmth and power surged through his magical core making him stagger. "What the bloody hell…" He'd expected Dumbledore's wand to be powerful, but this was insane. This wand felt almost sentient.

Disturbed, Draco shoved it into his robe pocket and went in search of the werewolf.

xXx

Shadow woke confused. He was lying in a large temple-like structure he didn't recognize. There were no walls, only columns that reminded him of some ancient Greek structure. Everything was white, pristine, and bright. Standing, he walked to the edge of the temple and looked down. To his horror, there was no ground in sight, just endless blue sky and white clouds. He gasped and scrambled back to the center of the structure. He bumped into a fountain that he was certain hadn't been there before.

Timidly, he looked down into his reflection. One blue eye, one green stared up at him. Black curly hair framed his face, and he smiled happily. Tension he wasn't even aware of drained from his shoulders in relief. He was Shadow again, not Harry bloody Potter. A clatter of stones tumbling sounded behind him and he spun around. Sitting against one of the columns, a figure in a black straight jacket and a deep hood absently shifted and tugged at his restraints.

"Seraphim?" Shadow called. "What's going on?"

The figure didn't answer.

"Where are we?"

Nothing.

Shadow strode angrily over. He grabbed the hood and yanked it off. Voldemort looked up at him, his monstrous face stretched with a demented grin, his red snake-eyes glowing. The Dark Lord cackled as Shadow fell back with a scream of horror.

Voldemort stood, towering over Shadow. The marble under his feet turned black. It slowly spread outward as storm clouds and lightning gathered at his back. "Thank you, Potter," Voldemort hissed in Parseltongue. "You've made me a god on Earth."

"No," Shadow gasped. He couldn't catch his breath. His heart beat viciously at his ribs as he scrabbled at the marble, trying to get the traction to stand.

Inky shadows of pure Black magic snaked over Voldemort's form and the straight jacket snapped and disintegrated. Corpse-white hands were freed as the Dark Lord snapped his wrist in Shadow's direction. Agony raced up his spine, engulfing him. His shrieks of pain echoed off the black marble, and he realized that he was Boy again.
Boy… forever Boy… Helpless, endless, hopeless suffering… He screamed and tumbled over the edge in to air with Voldemort's sadistic, triumphant laughter ringing in his ears as he plummeted into darkness. Shadow flailed, crying out, his voice hoarse from screaming, desperate to grab on to anything to stop his terrifying fall.

"You're dreaming. Wake up. Come on, Shadow. Wake up now."

He jerked as the voice finally reached him and he reached our desperately. Strong arms wrapped around him and he sobbed in utter gratitude as he was pulled up off the floor and back onto a bed. Heblinked tears from his eyes furiously. Severus came into focus and he crumbled against his father's chest, grabbing onto the front of his shirt as struggled to pull himself together.

"Shhh," Severus soothed. He gently rubbed circles between his son's shoulder blades. "You are safe. Nothing's going to hurt you here."

Slowly, Shadow forced his breathing to slow and deepen, forced his heart to calm and his hands to unclench. "Sorry," he croaked.

"Do you have nightmares often?" Severus asked.

"Often enough," Shadow answered wryly. He leaned away from the warm chest and wiped at his face. "God."

"What did you dream?"

Shadow stood and frowned down at himself. His jeans were too short and a bit looser than he remembered. His shirt was the same. Lifting his hands, he stared at the pale skin. He knew what he was going to feel, but he lifted his hand to his hair anyway. He was unsurprised to feel the soft curls. He spun around to face his father. Without glasses, he could see the man's neutral expression clearly.

"What happened? Why do I look like Shadow again?"

"When you drained your magic, the transformation lost its anchor and you reverted to your natural state," Severus explained calmly.

Shadow frowned. "We're in Grimmauld Place," he observed, looking around the room and recognizing it as his own. "Is my cover safe?"

"It is. You arrived here as Shadow. The majority of the Order members still do not equate you with Harry Potter." Severus stood and grabbed his black robes from the back of the desk chair. "I'm relatively certain that the Death Eaters attacking Gringotts were too preoccupied to recognize you as Shadow for the split second you were in your human form before Apparating."

"They associate my lynx to Harry Potter not Shadow Snape," he remembered. He'd gone in to the Department of Mysteries as a lynx and got down the prophecy. "I hope no one saw me."

"Come. We need to eat and find out what is happening from Charlie."

Shadow followed him down to the kitchen where Tonks, Cory Fenwick, and Stephan Pritchard were sitting having a late lunch. They looked strained. Shadow almost greeted Cory with friendly enthusiasm, but he caught himself at the last minute.

Cory was Harry Potter's friend and teacher, not Shadow Snape's. Sighing, the teenager took a seat at the table and rubbed at his forehead, trying to suppress the migraine that was building. It was going
to be difficult keeping his two identities straight. He'd already slipped up with the Slytherins back at school. He couldn't make that kind of mistake again.

"Where is Weasley?" Severus asked, bringing the curious eyes away from his son.

"War Room, where else?" Tonks asked with a laugh.

Severus nodded and swept from the room.

Shadow quickly put together a tray with some biscuits, tea, and fruit. No one said anything as he levitated it after him as he left the room.

Charlie was indeed in the War Room. The redhead was slouched in his chair, reports spilled out in front of him. Severus had taken the seat to the right of him. They both looked over as Shadow entered. He quirked his lips in a wry smile and settled the tray in front of them as he took the seat next to his father.

Charlie nodded at him in acknowledgement and reached for a cup of tea. "As I was saying, Minerva has been arrested. She's being held in the Ministry holding cells pending further investigation."

Shadow's eyes widened. "What? Why?"

"The Ministry thinks the Order is in league with the Death Eaters. They have demanded of Minerva to reveal our location and a list of members. She has refused, thus her incarceration," Charlie explained tiredly. He leaned back and sipped at his tea. "Equally disturbing, Umbridge has been named Headmistress. She sacked and evicted Flitwick, Hagrid, Firenze, and Trelawney. Amycus Carrow, a Death Eater and pedophile, has been admitted as a new teacher, I assume. Last but not least, she has activated Hogwarts's lockdown wards. No one can leave or enter the castle until the wards are taken down. Minister Scrimgeour has informed the public that this was done to protect the children in these troubled times. The wards will remain until the war is over and the Ministry has control over the traitors and rebels that are terrorizing the world."

"When did all this happen?" Shadow demanded.

"Shortly after dawn yesterday."

Shadow jumped to his feet and ran from the room.

Charlie lifted an eyebrow at the silent Potions Master, but Severus merely shook his head and asked, "What are your plans?"

"We can't exactly free Minerva without making the Order look even more guilty. Not to mention it would be very difficult and most probably cost us a good number of our members. As for Hogwarts, there's nothing we can do. It's locked down. Even if we could break the wards, which I don't think we can, we shouldn't. It would render the school vulnerable to the Dark Lord."

"I see."

Shadow strode back into the room, a scroll clutched in his hand. "Draco and I can communicate with this. . Hogwarts doesn't recognize Umbridge as the true Headmistress and has only minimal access to the wards. Draco has been granted true control. He will use them to protect the students from the Carrows and Umbridge as much as he can. He says Amycus is the Charms professor and Ravenclaw Head of House. Care of Magical Creatures and Divinations have been discontinued. The students are tense and afraid, but so far nothing too horrible has happened. The DA was discovered and most everyone was given detentions every night."
Charlie nodded. "Who else is there?"

"Sirius ran out of Polyjuice so he and Marissa have returned to the Chamber while Remus has returned to his position as the History professor and Gryffindor Head. Draco says there is still one way to leave or enter Hogwarts despite the lockdown that Umbridge is clueless about. It's in the Hog's Head. She won't be able to sense anyone who enters this way."

"That's good news," Charlie said with true relief.

Shadow tapped the scroll against his thigh thoughtfully. "Voldemort knows we are after the Horcruxes. He has to due to the break-in. If I were him, I'd have checked all my other hiding places. He must know we've destroyed almost all of them by now."

"That's not good news." Charlie frowned deeply. "There are still two left: the diadem and Nagini."

"I think Umbridge locking down the school is to our benefit. I think the diadem is there. The wards will keep him out for a while."

"But the Carrows are inside. They will have the diadem and will protect it," Severus countered.

"That might actually be to our benefit, as well," Shadow argued. "We don't know where the diadem is. If Voldie told them where, they will fetch it out into the open. It may make it more difficult to destroy because they will be guarding it, but at least we'll know where it is. On the other hand, if Voldie doesn't tell them, we still have a chance to find it first and destroy it while it's vulnerable. Draco says he has a possible lead, should that be the case."

Severus and Charlie nodded thoughtfully.

"As for Nagini, she's going to be kept beside Voldemort at all times. He's going to be very protective of her. We always knew that. We'll have to kill her while fighting him."

"So Hogwarts will be the final battle ground," Charlie realized unhappily.

Shadow nodded. "He's going to be heading there as soon as he gathers his forces. We need to do the same. We have to protect the castle and the students. Voldemort can't be allowed to get inside until the diadem is destroyed."

Charlie nodded and began to look feverishly through his notes. "I'll call together all the team leaders. We'll be ready."

"I'm going to Hogwarts to help Draco," Shadow decided. He looked questioningly at Severus.

The man's dark eyes held those of his son's thoughtfully. After a long moment, he spoke. "I will stay and help the Order strategize."

Shadow bowed his head in acknowledgment as his chest expanded with happiness and pride. His father was trusting his ability to protect himself and to handle the situation in Hogwarts. "I'll leave the scroll so we can stay in touch."

Severus accepted it. "The potion is in my room in the Chamber. The second shelf in the potions cabinet. It's clearly labeled."

"Thank you." Shadow hugged him quickly and left the two men to their plans.

xXx
Draco strode quickly through the halls with students who hurried to their last class of the day. None looked at him or noticed his presence, but that wasn't what had the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. He was invisible to them, wrapped in the magic of Hogwarts wards. This ability certainly explained the Headmasters' ability to seem omniscient. No, what had his skin crawling was the silence.

There was no chatter about the latest gossip or friendly banter or shouted insults. They walked in groups with their heads down and their eyes shifted watchfully. This wasn't the same Hogwarts that he remembered from even a week ago. And these weren't the same kids he'd grown up with. They all looked older. Fear did that, Draco figured.

By the time he was back in the Chamber, his outrage had turned into something harder, colder. With utter certainty, he knew Umbridge and the Carrows wouldn't survive this war. He'd see to it. He pushed aside his new determination as he reached the side passage. The door swung open and Draco felt a grin stretch his face. When Godric had alerted him to his love's arrival, he hadn't really believed it.

Shadow caught sight of him and mirrored his expression. He was sweaty and breathing hard as he stepped eagerly forward into Draco's tight embrace.

"Merlin, when we got separated, I about went mad," Draco said thickly into the curls under his cheek. "How did you get out of there?"

"We almost didn't," Shadow answered, shivering in remembered horror. The thought of going back underground had made him hyperventilate, but he had to get into the Chamber. He'd all but ran the whole way through. The vast entrance chamber with the arched ceiling was the only thing keeping him calm even now. Pushing his fear down hard, he stepped back and evaluated the blond. "What's been going on here?"

"Where do I begin?" Draco ran a hand through his uncharacteristically greasy hair as he walked further into the main chamber. He took a seat at the long table they'd put there. "I've brewed a numbing potion that those in our midnight Slytherin group take every morning. Carrow acts like she can do whatever she wants now, and she's not wrong. Umbridge practically dotes on her. As for the brother…"

Shadow felt his chest tighten. "Has he…?"

"Not yet," Draco reassured him. "But he's been eyeing some girls in Ravenclaw. He checked on them last night, supposedly to make sure they were all in bed by curfew, but he lingered too long for that to be the truth. Godric and I are almost finished weaving sexual suppressants around the tower. It should be active by tomorrow night. We could do it faster, but it might tip off Umbridge. She doesn't have that much control, but can still sense large changes in the wards if they happen too suddenly."

Shadow felt a wave of gratitude for Draco's capability. He needed a partner more than a lover right now. Clearing his throat, he changed the subject. "Did you make any headway about the potential location of the diadem?"

"No. I've been focusing on protecting the students."

"Who was your lead?"

"Ravenclaw's ghost and the Bloody Barron."

Shadow nodded and got to his feet, but Draco caught his wrist.
"What happened? How did you get out?"

Shadow ducked his head and allowed Draco to pull him back until he stood cradled by the blond's legs. As Draco's hands settled on his waist, he answered softly, "We got turned around in the tunnels. By the time we found the exit, the attack on Gringotts was already in progress. I shifted to my lynx form. Severus followed under the cloak."

Draco's fingers tightened. He didn't need Shadow's empathy to feel the tense emotional undercurrents of that simple explanation. The tightness of his lover's face told him everything he needed to know. With a sigh, he leaned his head forward so that it rested on Shadow's chest.

"I'm glad your back," he said, knowing Shadow would hear his real message, You're safe now. Shadow stared down at him, his two-colored eyes so beautiful. Draco reached up and cupped his soft cheek. He smiled softly when Shadow leaned into the caress. Sliding his hand further back and gently clasping his neck, Draco applied a slight pressure. Shadow bent forward as he allowed Draco to guide their mouths together. The kiss was tender and Shadow clasped Draco's shoulder tightly as emotions too powerful to name boiled over.

Opening his mouth, Draco tightened his hold on his lover's neck and brushed his tongue against the softness of Shadow's lips. He remembered kissing him as Harry and moaned softly in relief that he had Shadow back. His love's mouth parted, his tongue tentatively brushing Draco's. When he felt the hand on his shoulder begin to tremble, he nipped sharply, making Shadow gasp and his body sway forward.

A bright flare in his connection to the wards alerted him to a change in the school. Regretfully, he broke the kiss and steadied Shadow as he overbalanced. "I have to check on things. Go talk to the ghosts. We'll meet here when we're done."

Shadow nodded and pulled away, his hands running through his hair self-consciously. Draco watched him stride away. As soon as he was out of sight, he reached for his connection to Godric. The phantom appeared before him. His expression as solemn as ever.

"The suppression ward is beginning to take effect," Godric reported. "However, this has made Amycus's urges stronger outside of the tower. He's with a second year right now in the Charms classroom."

Draco stood and strode over to the nearest wall. "We've no choice but to go on the offensive."

"You didn't tell Shadow."

"No. He has other things to worry about. I'll deal with Amycus myself."

The wall began to ripple and Draco stepped forward into the back of the Charm's classroom. The pudgy man was better looking than his deformed sister, but he was still disgusting, his features overly large on his square face. At the moment, his back was to Draco. His short, sausage-like fingers running through the terrified girl's hair. Tears streaked her face as Amycus murmured endearments and cooing words into her ear.

Draco reached for his wand, but before he could clasp it, the Elder wand jumped into his hand from the opposite pocket. A powerful jolt of energy leapt up his arm and Draco grit his teeth to keep from gasping out loud. Almost like a whisper, a spell formed in his mind. A cold smile twisted his lips as he lifted the wand at Amycus's chest, right on level with the man's rotten heart.
"Dementum patronus eradicus," Draco whispered.

Black mist spiraled out of the wand. Draco fought to keep his hand steady. The closer the cloud got to Amycus, the more streamline it became until it streaked across the distance like a miniature Dementor. Amycus jerked, his back arching. A scream of pure despair erupted from his throat. The girl, Alice, screamed and scrambled out of her seat, away from the man now convulsing on the floor.

"It's okay. He won't touch you ever again," Draco promised her. "Calm down and go back to your dorms. He won't remember this."

Alice stared at him, sobs making her shake. "Th-thank you."

"Go on now," he said gently as he stepped forward toward Amycus.

The man was curled on his side, crying now. Alice didn't wait to be told again. She ran from the room without looking back. Draco knelt and lifted Amycus's head. He brought his wand to his temple. Amycus stared up at him in uncomprehending horror. He stuttered, but couldn't get a coherent word past his lips.

"Every time you look at a little girl and think something disgusting, you'll feel the most staggering despair. I suggest you try and control yourself. I'd hate it if you were driven to kill yourself," Draco said with false sweetness.

"N-no..." Amycus whimpered.

"Obliviate," Draco cast with a sneer.

Amycus fell back limply. His eyes dazed and empty. Draco spat on his cheek as he stood. The wall was still rippling and he stepped through back into the Chamber.

xXx

Shadow slipped into an abandoned dungeon room. There were broken beds and desks pushed against the far wall, but there was enough space near the door for him to shut it and sit down on the floor. He took a deep breath and opened himself up to the phantom that was never far from him when he was inside Hogwarts.

Salazar appeared instantly, a smug expression on his monkey-like face. "Is there something you need?"

"You know there is," Shadow answered casually. He leaned his back against the door and stared up at the phantom. "Since you know people so well, I thought maybe you could put your knowledge to use."

Salazar lost his cocky posturing and looked thoughtfully down on the teen. "Oh yes?"

Shadow shrugged. "I'm going to do it with or without your advice, but I figured I should make use of any resources I can."

"What exactly do you need my advice on?" the phantom asked as he sat across from him.

"I need to approach the Baron and Ravenclaw's ghost. They are from another time from me. I'm not sure I know the best approach."

Salazar tilted his head. "I wouldn't approach the Lady Ravenclaw. What you seek, she would not
give up easily. The Baron will be difficult, but if you have the key he will be the stronger ally."

"I see." Shadow rubbed his forehead, his mind racing as he tried to piece together a picture from all the little bits he knew revolving around the diadem. "Something happened to both of them that resulted in their deaths. The diadem was a part of it somehow. The Lady wouldn't give it up willingly, but the Baron would if approach correctly…"

Salazar lifted his eyebrow, pleased the teen was figuring things out mostly on his own.

Unaware of the phantom's approval, Shadow continued his train of thought. "That means the Baron isn't focused on the diadem for his own sake but more because the Lady is. So the Lady is the object of his obsession. If I can somehow convince him my possessing the diadem would increase his chances of impressing or winning the Lady, then the Baron would be eager to help me."

"Well reasoned." Salazar inclined his head. "The question now is how exactly is your having the diadem going to make the Lady look more favorably on the Baron. If she found out he helped you steal it, her dislike for him would only grow."

Shadow nodded. "That's true…" Biting his lip, he tried to feel his way through a scenario that would work in his favor. "But if the Baron was seen as protecting the diadem, then she would be pleased. It can't be held against him if he wasn't able to succeed. He is a ghost. So not only will he be seen as her hero, but the diadem will happen to get destroyed in the process, thereby freeing her of her obsession and opening the way for the Baron."

"Sounds like you have a plan," Salazar said with a smirk as he disappeared.

Shadow snorted at the phantom's antics. Now all he had to do was find the wayward Baron. At this time of the evening, he was usually in the tower across from the Ravenclaw dorms. He'd never really realized what that meant, but now it seemed tragic. Forever cursed to love from afar even though his love was within reach. Hopefully, he and the Baron could help each other out.

xXx

Severus eyed the parchment in between stirring the large, twenty gallon cauldron bubbling away in front of him. Shadow had yet to respond to his inquiry on his status. He had to assume his son was busy. Surlly he would have heard if Shadow had run into trouble. If not from Draco, then from the mangy wolf and the mutt. He scowled down at the progressing potion when the worry refused to be diminished by logic.

"Severus?"

He turned and found an obviously pregnant Tonks standing in the doorway. "Congratulations on your child's health."

The woman's hair faded from red to pink with her happiness. "Thank you, Severus." She stepped further into the room, correctly assuming that if the fumes were dangerous to her baby Severus would have remarked on it by now. "I just came to see what's had you locked away down here. You've missed two meals."

"The final battle is upon us. I'm making Merlin's Brew for the Order members. We will need something to offset the balance. The Death Eaters will outnumber us greatly, and it grants a temporary increase in both physical prowess and mental acuity."

"My god," Tonks breathed. "Merlin's Brew… I thought that was just a legend."
"It is very difficult to make as well as expensive. For many, a legend is all it will ever be."

Tonks smiled fondly. "But not for you, eh, Snape?"

Severus snorted disdainfully and turned back to the cauldron. He grabbed three quarters of a tablespoon of powdered Gryphon talon and scattered it along the edges of the potion, very careful to get none in the center. "I must concentrate."

Tonks shook her head and slipped silently out of the lab, leaving Severus to his potion.

xXx

Dawn was quickly approaching, but there was no rest in sight. Draco had just left the Headmaster's tower after making Umbridge have exhausting dreams that should keep her distracted even during the horrible detentions she'd created for the DA.

Ginny had been given five lashes for her mouth just last night. The Slytherins weren't faring much better with Alecto Carrow. Draco had gone to the Room of Requirement at midnight to help heal them. The pain potions they take every morning to strengthen them for the day's abuse also helped, but it wasn't enough. This would have to end soon.

Stepping into the Chamber, he found Shadow at the long table with Sirius and Marissa. They were talking in low tones. Marissa sat subdued, playing with her porridge. "What's going on?" he asked.

"The Baron told me where the diadem is. Now Sirius and I are going to stage a battle that makes the Baron appear heroic while I end up with the diadem. It should be destroyed in two hours," Shadow explained. "Will you watch Marissa until then?"

"Yes, but you better be quick. The Dark Lord will attack as soon as the sun sets tonight," Draco informed them.

Shadow stared. "How do you know?"

"Death Eaters are already testing the wards. Hogwarts is sensitive enough to catch their intentions."

"I understand. I'll let Severus know."

"Let's do this thing!" Sirius cheered, ecstatic to be doing something to help.

Draco smiled tiredly at the older man. "One more thing. Once the diadem is destroyed, we won't need to lay low. We can't be attacked from within while being attacked from without." He held Shadow's gaze and was pleased when the other teen nodded approval. "We take out the Carrows and Umbridge."

Sirius grinned wolfishly. "Sounds like we have work to do."

Shadow stepped forward and squeezed Draco's hand briefly before following his godfather from the Chamber.

Draco turned to look at the pouting Marissa. "Don't worry, poppet. We'll be done soon. This will all be over and we can go home."

"Where's that?" she asked despondently.

"Wherever we make it," Draco told her gently. He smoothed her copper curls and she smiled up at him, lifting her arms. Draco scooped her up onto his hip. "What say you? Want to help me brew up
trouble?"

"Yeah!" Marissa called out happily.

xXx

Sirius leapt agilely over a pile of, what was in his opinion, crap. The maneuver would have been impressive if his trouser leg wasn't smoking due to the fiendfyre that he'd cast and had now gotten out of control. In front of him, Shadow was battling the Bloody Baron with flashy spells over a statue that was wearing a surprisingly plain looking diadem. The smoke was making things confused, which was good because they had an audience they hadn't expected.

Every single Hogwarts ghost was in the Room of Requirement with them. The Baron had almost exhausted himself, but the Lady of Ravenclaw was now stepping up to defend the diadem herself. Normally, Shadow would win easily. He had more natural energy and magic at his disposal, and the ghosts couldn't cast magic per say, but if they exerted enough of their energy they could neutralize the magic Shadow cast. Unfortunately, the fire Sirius had cast to keep things confused was working against his godson. Shadow needed to breathe when the ghosts didn't. It also didn't help that there was a bunch of ammunition within reach of the ghosts to fling at the hapless wizard.

"Shadow! Duck!" Sirius called as he dove and came up with a powerful blasting hex that cleared the area around the statue and the diadem.

The Lady's willowy form distorted with rage as Shadow summoned the diadem to him in the confusion. "The Diadem of Wisdom! Give it back!" she screeched, making the piles of lost treasures tremble dangerously around them.

With the last of his strength, the Baron dove at Shadow in an attempt to possess him.

Sirius stared in horror as his godson's back bowed backward, his mouth falling open in a silent scream. He ran forward as Shadow collapsed in violent convulsions. Veins bulged grotesquely under the teenager's fair skin. Sirius fell to his knees, screaming Shadow's name. Horribly, the two-colored eyes shifted over to meet his own. Shadow knew what was happening. A ghostly face rose out of the teen's as the Baron tried to escape. The transparent mouth was wide with equal agony.

Nearly Headless Nick, Lady Ravenclaw, and Peeves hovered nearby, the diadem forgotten as they watched the horrific scene play out. Shadow's body jackknifed. Sirius was flung back as an arm collided with his face. When he could see past the tears, he saw Salazar’s phantom literally pulling the Baron from Shadow's body. Halfway out, Shadow's scream became vocalized.

The sound rose over the roar of the unstoppable fire and made the hair on the back of Sirius's neck stand up. A sudden cough ripped up from his lungs. He looked back over his shoulder and saw blue flames licking at the ceiling. Heat poured down his back. Sweat drenched his body as his coughs became consistent. He looked frantically down at Shadow and saw the teen suck in the tainted air at the end of his desperate scream and wheeze.

"Hurry, hurry," Sirius chanted, voice raspy.

Salazar ignored him and continued to carefully separate the Baron's essence from Shadow's complex and meticulously compartmentalized mind.

Unexpectedly a gust of fresh air brushed by them as someone flung open the door to the Room of Requirement. Smoke billowed past them as it raced toward the open door and the hallway beyond it. A figure moved forward, but a wall of fire cut between them. Sirius wasn’t sure if that was a good
thing or not. He only caught a glimpse of the figure and with the smoke he wasn't sure if it were Umbridge or a friend to the rescue.

"We've got to move," he gasped.

Salazar's eyes snapped open. The Baron shot into the air. Shadow fell limp, the diadem still clutched securely in his white-knuckled grasp. Sirius dove forward and scooped Shadow up into his arms bridal style. The teen was not heavy, but the smoke inhalation had Sirius staggering to the side, feeling like he was about to cough up his lungs. Then, as if in answer to his prayers, the fiendfyre impossibly disappeared. As grateful as he was, Sirius still managed to get his wand pointing in the direction of the door.

"Is he all right?" Draco demanded, stepping clear of the smoke.

Sirius could only nod. He passed Shadow forward and the Slytherin accepted the burden easily. Hands on his knees, Sirius gasped and hacked while Draco cast diagnostic spells over Shadow.

"He's exhausted and his stress levels are through the roof. Let's get back to the Chamber."

Sirius followed him, only half aware of the silent watch of the ghosts. "Marissa?"

"I put her in a charmed sleep. She won't wake until I take it off." Draco looked back over his shoulder, his eyes calm. "I couldn't be tied down right now, and this is safest for her. She'll be safe in the Chamber."

Sirius considered berating the blond for so callously getting Marissa out of the way, but then realized that Draco had probably done the best thing. Sirius didn't want to sit on the sidelines, either. He loved Marissa more than he thought possible. This fight was just that important for all of them.

Once they returned to the Chamber, Draco took Shadow back to his bedroom and laid him gently on the bed. "We have eight hours more until sundown," he remarked.

Sirius frowned. "Will he be up by then?"

"Let's hope." Draco bent down and kissed his lover's forehead. "It sucks, but we're going to need him. Already the wards are weakening and they're up as strong as they can go. They have some serious magical power on their side."

"Not what I wanted to hear," Sirius admitted. "You have a plan?"

Draco turned with a decidedly evil grin. "Of course. I'm Slytherin. Or had you forgotten that?"

"Care to share?" Sirius drawled as he followed the blond back into the main chamber.

"For as long as living memory recalls, this castle has only functioned defensively. I'm going to change that. There are old wards, old spells, in place that will turn the castle into a weapon." Grey eyes burned in the firelight. "The Dark Lord won't know what hit him."

Sirius grinned and listened attentively to Draco's plans.

xXx

Charlie and Shacklebolt stood side-by-side in the sitting room of Grimmauld Place. A complex spell had expanded the room temporarily to the size of a football field. Every single Order member, old and young, healthy or sick, filled the space to capacity. Almost two hundred souls all told, and still
the odds did not look good.

"Tonight will decide the fate of our world," Charlie began, his voice cutting across the tense silence like a war cry. "Tonight we fight for the future. Tonight we fight for the past. Darkness has seeped into our lives slowly. It has killed our loved ones, our family. It has corrupted our brothers and sisters, our children. Tonight we fight back and prove once and for all that we Will Not Let Darkness Triumph!"

The crowd reacted with a roar of approval. Fists viciously punched out at the air. Charlie met the ferocity of his people with a hungry grin. He flung his arms up, beckoning for silence. It came reluctantly.

"The numbers are against us. Sheer magical strength is against us. But we have cleverness, self-sacrifice, and selflessness on our side. It doesn't matter what they throw at us, we ARE the stronger because our people are that much stronger! Severus has labored to create a potion to even the field a bit and has produced something miraculous. He's made enough Merlin's Brew for all of us to have a single dose. Kingsley."

The large black man moved forward and began to pass out the single small vial to each Order member. Shocked gasps and excited murmurs rose as the man advanced through the ranks.

"Use it well," Charlie cautioned. "Now is not the time to be reckless. You'll feel invincible on the potion, but you are still human. It is our humanity that separates us from our enemies. Don't forget that." He smiled as he noticed solemn nods in response to this. "Use our enemies' weaknesses against them. We know how to work as a team. We trust the wizards and witches standing at our backs. They do not. They will be jockeying for power, for the rights to the best kill. Be clever, be strong. And SHOW NO MERCY!"

The cry that answered him was almost deafening.

xXx

The Dark Lord moved through the darkening forest. Cold mist licked at the hem of his robes due to the Dementors flanking his sides. The sky was painted a bloody red as the sun fell gloriously below the horizon. Voldemort smirked and heard an echoing laugh from Nagini who moved sensuously at his heels. The Light would fall. It was inevitable. The battle would be spectacular and horrific, but they would fall. Just as the sun was forced to set every night, Hogwarts would be brought to her knees. No one could stand against his might. He wouldn't be denied. And by the time of the new dawn, he'd be a Dark God, who's will would shape the world in his image.

"Feast, my beauties," Voldemort whispered, desire and anticipation silkening his voice. "Leave no one alive. Destroy them all."

The Dark creatures tied to him in alliance shivered in ravenous anticipation. Voldemort had kept them hungry just for this. They watched as the sun slowly disappeared. Darkness stretched across Hogwarts grounds as hungry monsters surged forward with hungry cries. Voldemort's high-pitched cackle heralding in the destruction.

Chapter end.
A/N: This is it, guys! This is the last chapter of this installment. There will be a third installment. A kind of long epilogue that follows titled FLYING WITH TATTERED WINGS. I hope you read on and enjoy it. I really, really appreciate all the support and feedback and comments. It keeps my story alive. THANK YOU!

... 

The End

Agony. Writhing, twisting, consuming pain. Shadow's muscles spasmed, his body contorting, as he became Harry Potter once again. From across a vast distance, from over a stormy ocean, he could hear Draco's voice trying to soothe him. Shadow held onto that beloved tenor. It kept him afloat, kept him from being pulled under. Strong hands clasped his wrists, preventing him from scratching himself in an attempt to pull the torment out from under his skin. He screamed and wept, silently begging for it to end. It couldn't last much longer, could it?

*I am more than pain*, he chanted almost hysterically in his mind. *I am more than my body.*

Seraphim stirred, echoing his cries with devastated whimpers that only he could hear. Then, like mercy, the pain began to fade, the spasms to still. Two normal, light green eyes opened. Harry Potter lay panting, covered in sweat, and trembling with reaction.

Draco stared down at him. This time had been worse. He didn't think Shadow could endure the change again. Whether it was from changing so often or because his love's DNA just couldn't handle anymore transformations, Draco didn't know, but he was going to make damn sure Severus didn't make any more of that blasted potion.

"You with me?"

Harry squeezed Draco's hand reassuringly. "I'm fine," he rasped breathlessly.

Draco said nothing to that absurd statement. He thought darkly of every sacrifice this war had required. His mother was dead. Lucius was insane. Shadow tortured himself just so he could keep his identity a secret and give stupid people hope. The students were being tortured by Death Eaters. The Ministry was arresting the good guys. People were dying. Draco, himself, was preparing to kill, to fight, to make choices that were not choices at all.

"I'll destroy the diadem. You take care of Umbitch and the Carrows."

Draco looked up to see that Harry had gotten dressed while he'd been lost in thought. The teen was pale and still shaky, but his expression was determined and unyielding. Softly, Draco said, "Good luck. If you need me…"

"I know." Harry smiled and stepped up to his lover. Standing on tip-toe, he kissed the blond's cheek and wrapped him in a quick, warm hug. "Same for you. Be careful, Draco." *I can't lose you,* he added silently to himself.

Just thinking about the very real possibility that Draco would be hurt or even killed made his chest constrict and sweat break out along his brow. Their relationship was fraught with baggage and difficulties, but that didn't make it any less precious. He needed his family and Draco to come out of
this okay. It was as simple as that. If they didn't, he wasn't sure what would happen to him.

Draco bent down and captured the full lips with his own. Pulling back, he grinned. "We'll be okay. I promise."

Harry nodded. "Good." He watched silently as Draco walked away to do what he needed to do. Harry swallowed hard. It took almost all his strength to push his fear down, but he had his own tasks. He couldn't allow his focus to be compromised. Straightening his shoulders, he grabbed the diadem from the dresser and made his way into the great chamber where the basilisk lay.

Without hesitation, he opened the trunk, grabbed a fang, and set the diadem on the lid. He felt darkness pull at his senses, felt the semi-sentience scratch at his mental walls. Harry narrowed his eyes and slammed his arm down, piercing the Horcrux like butter. A shrill scream sounded, forcing Harry to cover his ears and stagger away. He quickly regained his footing and kicked out, sending the remains of the diadem sliding across the floor.

"Fiendus fyre!"

The metal of the priceless heirloom caught fire, the inhuman screech drowned out by the hungry roar of the flames. Harry watched to make sure the fire didn't spread to anything else, watched to be sure one of the last bits of his enemy was truly destroyed. He felt a smile stretch his face and knew it wasn't a pretty one. Adrenaline pumped in his veins as he moved forward, ready for all of this to be over.

xXx

Draco felt his mind focus, his emotions dull. It was like going cold but not like ice. It was more like cold lightning. His senses were acute, his awareness almost painfully sharp, he was practically vibrating with energy.

The Headmistress's office smelled like rose, the walls less cluttered, which gave a fake sense of space. Two large armchairs sat before the desk. They were white with a flower pattern print and cut down maneuverability. As for Umbridge, she stood behind her desk in her frilly pink robes. Her blue eyes were wide and her wand was pointed at the door-that-wasn't-a-door that he'd just stepped through. He had control over most of the wards, but she was connected enough for them to have warned her that someone with deadly intent was approaching.

"Hello, Dolores," he drawled, his own hands loose by his sides. "Having a good night?"

"Malføy!" Her mouth pursed and she tilted her head in a way he was sure she thought predatory.

"I've come with unfortunate news from the Minister," he said sadly.

She was confused by his calm demeanor, his seemingly concerned expression, his famous name. Her wand dipped an inch lower, now pointing at his hips instead of his chest. "What is it?"

"The Order is making their move," he answered with a smooth step forward and gesturing toward the window.

"What?" Her head swiveled to the side, looking outside.

"Avada Kedavra," he whispered, the Elder wand already in his hand and pointed.

The green light flashed out, taking with it a little of his natural resistance to kill and feeding his sense of revenge and euphoria. The witch fell dead without a single sound. Grinning, bright-eyed, Draco
levitated her over to the window and with a single thought widened it and disappeared the glass. Down below stood seven centaurs, Firenze once again among them. They'd given their word that Umbridge would never be found.

Draco spelled the horrible woman down into their waiting arms. With a war cry, the centaurs spun on their heels and galloped back into the woods. He watched them go, waiting patiently for his high to dissipate. Thunder rolled across the grounds as the outer-most wards collapsed under magical assault. Draco spun and strode smoothly for the wall, building a door as he walked.

"Students remain in your common rooms. Teachers remain with your assigned Houses. Death Eaters are attacking. Stay calm and listen for further instructions," Draco ordered as he stepped out into the dungeons. He had a Carrow to dispose of and he wouldn't have to hide her body. She willingly bore the Dark Mark.

Grimly, he made his way to the Slytherin dorms.

xXx

The Order Apparated in strategic positions surrounding Hogwarts into the echo of the wards falling. Charlie led his band of fifteen forward at a silent stalk. A group of Death Eaters were cheering as Dark creatures raced over the ground toward the castle proper. They were waiting before running forward themselves, not wanting to be caught and mauled by their supposed allies. Charlie slashed his wand forward and his people leapt, taking the Death Eaters down before their second step. Cries of surprise and victory filled the air.

A growl sounded to the right and Charlie spun to see five half-transformed werewolves spring out of the darkness. He cried a warning, but it was too late. He went down under a heavy body. A vicious bite tore into his shoulder and, with a roar of pain, he got busy fighting for his life.

xXx

By the Whomping Willow, large roots exploded from the ground, knocking McNair off his feet. The man's balding head bounced off the suddenly hard earth and rendered him unconscious. Rookwood ran to his ally's aid, afraid of being overpowered by the Order if he remained alone, and was snagged by the waist and pulled underground with a terrified scream.

The Order members cheered and moved past, looking for new prey. Severus remained silent. He alone was aware of the significance of the earth rising up against their enemies. It was no spell or ward. It was a teenager, battered and bruised already from his encounters with the war. He could only hope Neville would emerge from this latest episode undamaged. He couldn't fathom his son's reaction if he were to lose his brother to the war.

Severus took a step forward but stopped. His attention was being pulled backward. He turned and looked. There... On the outskirts of Hogsmeade at the Shrinking Shack, Voldemort's presence throbbed against the sky. Not exactly a glorious home base for the Dark Lord, he thought with a tight smirk.

His amusement faded as he realized that wherever Voldemort lingered, his son wouldn't be far behind. Under no circumstances would he allow Shadow to face his destiny alone. Silently, Severus moved quickly across the grounds.

xXx

Neville existed in a place where urgency was rare. In the end, seasons pass, life thrives and dies in
cycles, and he existed with an unwavering, steady heartbeat. Occasionally there were times when something pivotal occurred, where the balance was being threatened. He sensed just such a time was upon him. Collapse lingered threateningly as agents of chaos made another push for destruction. The flavor of that magic stirred something deep in his mind and Neville found himself slowly releasing his hold on the Earth's consciousness and embracing his own once again.

Death Eaters were at Hogwarts. Dark creatures who were connected to the Earth with a unique bond were off their hunting grounds and converging at the school. He could feel the struggle as humans clashed with humans, magic vied against magic. Memories of Dark Ages filtered through his mind and he moaned his denial. Such times were so hard on the Earth, on every single life. He wouldn't stand by and let another Dark Age come to pass. He wouldn't let the world be at the mercy of the same people who held him in that cell, who tormented him body and mind.

Saturated with the Earth, Neville communicated his need to help restore the balance. Something unlocked and he felt all of Hogwarts grounds as if it were his own body. The aggressors held a distinct feel, disrupting the life web of this area, and he lashed out with limb and root, with angry warning tremors that knocked the Death Eaters off balance. Neville felt no joy at this destruction, only a grim focus to protect life as he knew it.

xXx

Ginny crouched on the grand staircase in the Entrance Hall with Ron and Hermione beside her. She'd been preparing for this fight for months and wasn't about to sit it out waiting in the common room like a good little girl. She sent a message through the coins to the DA and was pleased to see most of them there with her. Their wands were steady as they aimed at the front door to Hogwarts. They would protect the school.

They would prove they were just as capable as the adults.

She didn't expect the waiting to be so hard, though. Her arm was getting tired and the adrenaline was leaving her system, making her hand shake. Horrible sounds drifted through the thick stone walls, screams mostly. Every time the ground rumbled, she noticed the others sharing nervous looks.

"Steady!" she called loudly. "We can't expect everything to work out okay. We're not children who can be pacified by reassuring lies. If we want to win this war, we're going to have to fight for it!"

Backs straightened and wand arms stiffened. Ginny smiled at them encouragingly. This was it; their time to prove themselves. And they were going to give some Death Eaters the surprise of their life.

xXx

Harry stepped free of the tunnel that led from the Chamber to the forest. Cold instantly washed over him and his insides quavered. Dementors were near. He didn't look around for them. He kept his eyes steady and pinned on the smirking Death Eater waiting for him.

"Potter. How good of you to join us," Lucius drawled from behind his featureless mask.

"Lucius." Harry allowed a cold smile to touch his lips. "Have you mastered the art of groveling like a worm yet?"

Lucius laughed. "I was hoping you'd give us lessons. You were so good at it as I recall."

"Funny. I recall something different. Slaughtering your Lord, for example."
With a snarl, Lucius snapped his wand up. "The Dark Lord is waiting, Potter. Come quietly or I'll be forced to…"

"Oh, enough, Lucius. I'm here for a reason. Take me to your wonderful Master. I'm ready to end this once and for all."

Harry could feel Lucius's fury. He almost smiled, but he forced his expression to remain blank. This wasn't a game, as much as it felt like it at the moment. He could hear screams on the air. The war had begun and he needed to finish Voldemort as quickly as possible.

"Lead the way, Lucy."

"Shut up, Potter. I can always say you resisted."

"Which would work for all of two seconds before your Master read your mind," Harry drawled with a sneer. "Are we doing this or not? I'm sure old snake-face won't be pleased you're holding me up."

"Walk." Lucius pointed north toward Hogsmeade.

Harry didn't trust him one bit, but he was forced to step past him and move in the direction indicated. He could feel pure malevolence aimed at his back. Silently, he incanted shield charms behind him. Just in case good sense ran out for the eldest Malfoy.

xXx

Sirius staggered into the Great Hall with a dead Amycus Carrow levitating behind him. Both the Death Eater and the Animagus looked the worse for wear. Draco rolled his eyes at Sirius's large grin. The man had no doubt taunted Amycus and engaged him in a duel. It, perhaps, entertained the eager man, but now Sirius had wounds across his shoulder, his left hand looked broken, and the battle had just begun.

"Dolores taken care of?" Sirius asked as he dumped Amycus's body next to his sister's. He could see Draco had been successful with the other Carrow.

"Of course," Draco answered with a sneer. He was untouched, having snuck up on Alecto and killing her quickly as he had Umbridge.

"Then let's get this party started."

Draco refrained from lecturing the man and simply nodded. "They should breach the Entrance Hall in a few minutes."

"Good." Sirius twirled his wand around his fingers.

Draco was about to say something cutting when he froze. Ginny, Hermione, and Ron were leading a good portion of the DA in battle against corrupted Slytherins.

"Bloody hell!" Sirius snarled.

Draco dove back into the Great Hall as a deadly cutting hex almost took his head off his shoulders. He'd been so focused on his grisly jobs that he'd forgotten the corrupted Slytherins could pose an equal threat. Crouched, wands in hand, Draco and Sirius peered around the corner only to see Goyle run forward with a bellow and punch Ron in the face. The beefy blond's left arm was boneless from the redhead's curse, but that didn't save Ron as the redhead fell over backward with a cry.
"Ron!" Hermione cried, but she was too far away to stop what was happening, especially with Montague dueling her. If she dropped her guard, she'd be done.

Goyle raised his wand. "Ava…"

Sirius recklessly jumped into the open and blasted the Slytherin away from the redhead.

A Dark curse would have struck the Animagus in the back, but Draco shoved him out of the way. "Everyone STOP!"

A wave of magic poured out of his wand even without him enchanting a spell. The struggling teenagers and Sirius all froze. Some were caught in awkward positions and tipped over. Draco stood and dusted off his pants, trying to conceal the fact that he was breathing hard.

"Has everyone lost their minds? There are monsters at our door about to break in and you're fighting each other?" he demanded as he walked among the Petrified crowd.

Just then the doors buckled. Draco felt the splintering in the wards and winced. He quickly released the DA, leaving the Slytherins as they were. It left them sitting ducks, but he couldn't afford to let them go. He'd protect them as much as he could.

Hermione and Ginny came up on either side of him. They were sweaty and pale, but their hands were steady. Sirius stepped a little in front, a grin still splitting his face.

The doors exploded and only Draco's spell kept them from being injured by the force of the debris. Glowing red eyes and fanged mouths filled Draco's vision as vampires stepped sensuously into the hall. Sirius bellowed a spell. Draco had no idea what he'd cast, but one vampire was flung against the wall. One of the girls screamed. More vampires and a few Death Eaters filled the doorway. Draco gritted his teeth and squared his stance. He aimed carefully, killing the farthest Death Eater on the right.

An agonized scream forced his head to turn. He couldn't see a face, but someone went down as a vampire bit out their throat. Blood sprayed the air obscenely, further obscuring the horrific act. A spell slammed into his chest, flinging Draco onto his back. Numbly, he stared at the ceiling where spell light flashed like fireworks. Feet shuffled almost like they were dancing. It was almost peaceful until someone tromped on his legs. He knew he'd be trampled if he stayed where he was. He tried to move and realized he couldn't. His heart wasn't beating.

Suddenly, animated suites of armor and figures from portraits given physical form crashed into the enemy forces. There was a ragged, desperate cheer from the students and snarls and screams from the intruders. Draco smirked, pleased that the reactivated wards he'd primed had come online. Darkness crowded his vision.

"Ennervate!"

Draco gasped, his back arching as his heart gave a hard beat and continued its rhythm. He quickly blinked away tears and smiled up at Hermione Granger. "Thank…" His gratitude was cut short as a vampire came up behind her and grabbed her head, breaking her neck. Draco screamed in denial, jumping to his feet with his wand practically vibrating in his hand.

xXx

Ginny stood absolutely numb. It felt like she was in a long tunnel. Disturbingly, the end of the tunnel was right in her face and in full color. Her body moved on reflex, but mostly she crouched down, terrified to be noticed. She'd never felt so goddamn small in her life or as fragile. In the back of her
mind, she was screaming to move, to protect her friends, but she couldn't move from sheer mortal terror. It stripped her bare and left her with nothing.

"Gin! Stay there!"

She looked up and saw her brother. Normally she'd be pissed that he was telling her what to do, but now all she felt was a relief powerful enough to sting her eyes with tears. The numbness thinned enough for her to feel that her heart was rocketing in her chest and that her hands were slippery with sweat.

"No!"

Ginny lifted her head to see Ron staring across the room. The seething mass of students, vampires, and Death Eaters parted just enough for her to see Hermione fall to the floor. Ron lashed his wand forward and summoned the girl's body. Ginny wheezed, her chest too tight as she crawled forward. Words, words she vaguely recognized, brought her attention back to her brother.

Ron knelt, his eyes locked on the girl he loved. His wand dug into his chest, right above his heart. The other hand pressed down on Hermione's.

"Ron… what…"

His blue eyes looked up at her. He and Charlie were the only ones who had blue eyes. The rest of her brothers had brown, like her. He and Charlie were special. They were the nicest to her. Looking at Ron now, he looked older and tired. He looked like he was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't understand. She couldn't think.

"Ron… I don't understand…"

He began to glow. It was like sunlight, warm and soft. The vampires shrieked as they backed away from them. The golden light spilled down Ron's shoulder and over Hermione. Ginny gasped. She tried to move, to scream, but she could only sit there and stare as Hermione drew breath once more and Ron fell over with a broken neck.

"Ginny! Retreat! Get the others!" A hand grabbed her shoulder and she looked up into Sirius's face. "Ginny! MOVE!"

"My brother's dead," she told him blankly. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Just a great rush, they'd all win, and everyone would walk away cheering. It wasn't supposed to be like this: dirty, painful… and permanent. "Ron's dead."

Draco came up beside Sirius and slapped her hard.

She just stared at him, hardly feeling it.

"Help me gather the others," the blond ordered. "We have to retreat to a more defensible spot."

Sirius nodded and levitated Hermione. He disappeared up the stairs at their backs. Ginny got to her feet with Draco's help, but her crutch was yanked away from her. The vampire leapt on Draco. Ginny screamed. Draco flinched away and the vampire only got the juncture of his shoulder.

Ginny shouted the first spell that came to mind and watched blood spray the air as she cut off the vampire's head. Draco disappeared under the wave of red, pinned by the dead body on top of him. Almost frantically, Ginny kicked the creature off her classmate. Draco came to his feet and staggered, spitting out blood and wiping off his face.
Shaking, Ginny couldn't even offer him a hand. She just blinked at him in shock. "Did you swallow any? Dear Merlin," she moaned, "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking!"

"Everyone! To me! Retreat!" Draco bellowed hoarsely, making her jump.

xXx

Harry and Lucius approached the Shrieking Shack at the edge of Hogsmeade. The night sky was tainted a glowing orange. Houses and shops were on fire. Slips of shadows fought each other in the streets, indistinguishable from each other. Gazing back the way they had come, he looked over Hogwarts's grounds.

It looked wrecked and his heart gave a pang, knowing it was Neville who had torn the earth and sent the trees into a fury. Broken bodies littered the ground like dark leaves. Others stood on their feet, still fighting. Werewolves, half-transformed by a potion no doubt, hunted as a pack, bringing those struggling down, never to rise again. Shrieks of pain and rage were carried on the breeze as it shifted into his face. It smelled of ash and death.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Potter? I have to give you some credit. You were instrumental in bringing this about."

Harry met Lucius’s manic gaze impassively. Without a word, he turned and opened the door to the dilapidated building that had once housed Remus during his time at Hogwarts. It was also the place where he'd been reunited with Sirius and learned the truth of his parents' death. It seemed wrong that this was where Voldemort wanted their last duel, the final battle, to take place. The place was too humble.

Hair rising on the back of his neck, Harry braced himself for the trap ahead, because that was what this was. Voldemort wasn't a Gryffindor to face him on even ground in a final duel. He was a Slytherin. When Harry didn't hear Lucius's steps behind him, he stopped and turned around.

"Go on, Potter," Lucius said with seeming indifference. "I don't have all day."

"You're not coming?"

Lucius's face was covered with a mask, but Harry could feel his cruel amusement clearly through his empathy and knew he was grinning. "Scared, Potter?" Lucius shook his head. "My Lord would like a private meeting."

Grimly, Harry turned and faced forward. He wrapped layers of shields around his body and gathered his power near the surface. This was a trap, but he had no other recourse but to walk into it. He had to get Voldemort to face him in order to kill him and the cowardly parasite would only do that if he thought Harry was at a disadvantage.

The first floor was dark, dusty, and the same as he remembered it. He moved toward the stairs. The door at the top was shut but hung a little to the side, allowing a solid bar of light to fall across his face. Taking a deep breath, practically vibrating with tension, he toed the door open to keep his wand aimed forward. Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

Horrified, he stared at the hovering starry sphere with the large anaconda snake wrapped around his father. Nagini's fanged mouth opened as she caught sight of Harry and stood poised over Severus's vulnerable throat. Harry remembered Mr. Weasley. Arthur had almost died from Nagini's deadly venom and still hadn't regained his full strength so many weeks later.

"Don't move," Harry hissed, his voice tight and harsh. "Don't you dare kill him."
Nagini laughed in answer. Her tongue darted out and delicately caressed Severus's skin.

Harry looked into his father's dark gaze. Severus's expression was blank, but through Harry's empathy he spoke loud and clear. Love, regret, and confidence poured off the man. Harry felt his hands begin to shake.

Severus knew it was important for Harry not to falter, to keep focused on the real issues. The last thing he could do was let Seraphim Out. Voldemort wanted the Black magic. Under no circumstances could he put it within reach of the madman. Voldemort had to be destroyed. Even if it meant Severus's death. Severus knew Harry well, and he felt proud and confident that his son would make the right choice. He only regretted Harry might witness his death.

Maybe Severus would have been right had Harry been merely Silas, but he was more than just cool Slytherin logic now. He was Gabriel, unable to even consider being unable to save those in need. He was Rose, a child who craved love so desperately she'd do anything for even a hint of acceptance. Now that he had the love he'd always craved, he couldn't bear to see it destroyed.

Nagini struck. Her head snapping forward. Her venomous jaws sank into the soft flesh of Severus's throat.

More importantly, Harry possessed the alter Seraphim. A tormented, abused psyche who clung to werewolf instincts in order to distance himself from his own insanity. Those instincts came roaring to the surface and broke through Harry's weakened control.

Seraphim screamed in terrified fury as one of his pack members dropped to the floor and began to convulse. The starry sphere holding the enemy shrunk and disappeared with a pop, summoned to safer ground. Seraphim jerked forward, intent on revenge, but came to a stop as the sound of the dark-eyed man's feet drummed on the creaky floor boards. Terror tipped the balance. He ran forward and grasped the man's arm, already pouring White magic down his hands.

xXx

Voldemort opened his eyes. He stood in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest. Death Eaters stood among the trees, facing outward, protecting him and keeping others away. Nagini appeared and he dismissed the complicated shielding around her. Everything was going just as he planned. The Potter brat had been forced to snap, his Dark magic almost certainly running wild this very instant. Even better, Severus Snape, his traitorous follower was dying a painful, lingering death. Yes. Everything was perfect. He just had to stay the course.

Savagely, he sliced the great snake from the bottom of her throat to the tip of her tail. Blood and half-digested food steamed in the cool night air. Voldemort opened his mouth wide and breathed in deep, his magic pulling… pulling… The Horcrux, his last one, was yanked into his body. It wasn't a pleasant sensation, but he forced the dizziness and nausea to stop through sheer will. He had to be in control for this next confrontation. Everything depended on it.

It had taken him a long time to accept that destroying his last Horcrux was the only option he had. He couldn't afford to be distracted or to be forced to protect something other than himself. Rage boiled under his skin as he thought about his other Horcruxes. His immortality had been destroyed by that meddling child. If he were very lucky, the diadem would still be safe, but Voldemort wasn't going to plan on it. He consoled himself with thoughts of a new kind of immortality. The pure Black magic would make him a true God.

As if summoned by his lust, the ground trembled and almost recoiled from the magic emanating from the northeast. Rage, destruction, power… It rolled before the Potter brat who had insane, glowing
green eyes. The trees bowed backward as Potter stepped into the clearing, his mouth curling with a
snarl of pure rage. Spittle flecked the boy's lips as he began to run, his fingers curled like claws.

Voldemort smirked as golden light flared like the sun. He'd been prepared for that and shielded his
eyes just in time. He opened them again to see the child of his destiny trapped like a bug in a jar in
the middle of a sparkling runic circle. Black waves rose up around the teen, but they had no effect
 whatsoever on his prison. Voldemort flung his head back and laughed. The end was near!

xXx

Seraphim realized he was trapped with a horrified howl. He crouched down, shivering in terrified
horror as his mind flashed back to a graveyard filled with unremitting torture. Figures with hated
white masks shifted and moved along the tree line. Surrounded, pinned, helpless once again, great
sobs wracked his frame. The monster with a snake face and human body laughed. It echoed,
overlapped with the memory of his Uncle's voice.

Bile burned the back of Seraphim's throat. No, no. Won't be helpless. Won't be hurt. Kill him. I'll kill
him! He glared with pure hatred at the creature stalking toward him.

"Well, well, Potter. Not quite the hero everyone expected, are you?" the monster drawled. A stick
twirled in his hand.

Seraphim remembered those sticks and again was awash in terror. Desperate pleas for mercy
trembled on his lips, but he couldn't voice them his throat was so tight. Silently he mouthed the
words, hysterical with fear. The hate and anger was out of reach, far out of reach. He couldn't even
remember what they had felt like. All he knew was fear and pain. Pain that had come, pain that
would come.

Please no more!

He couldn't bear it. The mere thought of the agony that was coming shattered him.

"You're going to die now, Potter. That circle you stand in will transfer all your power to me at the
moment of your death. Take comfort from the knowledge that at least your insignificant life will have
held some purpose. You will be the creator of the greatest being ever known to this world."

Red, evil eyes glittered as Voldemort lifted his wand.

Seraphim screamed.

xXx

Shadow finally understood. He wasn't really helpless. It was the fear that rendered him defenseless. It
was the fear that caged him more surly than the runic circle. Boy couldn't think past the fear, couldn't
exist past it. Shadow couldn't move past that fear either and accept Boy as part of himself. It was
always the fear trapping him.

Until now.

His only chance… his family's… Draco's… the Wizarding World's one chance… was for him to
stop letting the fear control him. Shadow had to let go of his fear… of fear…

Easy to realize, easy to say, but as he began to sink into the mind controlling his body… as he felt
sheer unadulterated terror first hand… he knew he was right to fear it. It was the most powerful force
he'd ever experienced. It reduced him to a mindless animal. His body wasn't even his to control. His
bladder released and coherent thought was impossible.

He forgot what his goal was… Forgot who he was… He wasn't a who anymore, he was a what, an it, a thing only able to feel fear.

Instinctively, he flailed, looking for a way to make it stop, to escape. Strangely, it was the Dark Lord who saved him.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The rage came then. It struck him so hard that he was flung onto his back. His body arched as he clawed at the ground with a mindless roar of fury. The anger was as strong as the fear. It overpowered him. Prevented him from thinking, but it was better because now he could move.

One second he was on the ground, the next he was flinging himself mindlessly against the barrier holding him in. Magic cackled around him. It poured through his veins until he thought he would burst into flames… No! He was fire, and he was burning… burning… starving to rip the sneering face off the man-like creature in front of him, his tormentor.

"Let's see you survive an imploded heart!" the vile creature screamed. "Annullo pectus!"

Faced with true death, he forced himself to breathe, to think past his emotions. He dodged the spell, eyes narrowed. The barrier was allowing magic in. It had to have a weakness. His eyes scanned the ground, adrenaline sizzling through every nerve, making air race through his lungs in an attempt to keep up. He recognized a few of those runes.

"Annullo pectus!"

So hard to think through the rage and fear while dodging the deadly, powerful curse. The rune… something about the rune… A snarl slipped past his lips, hate almost a living thing inside him. He wrestled it into submission. Understanding dawned and he laughed madly.

"Cohibeo," he screamed. An inverted shield audibly snapped into place.

Voldemort shrieked as the runic circle, which had been using the magic produced by Shadow to fuel itself, flickered and died. The Dark Lord scrambled for a defense, simultaneously summoning his Death Eaters.

Shadow leapt outside the circle, dropped the shield, and set his magic free with a wrath-filled howl.

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Remus lifted his head, his eyes golden as his werewolf sat close to the surface. Pure Black magic grew on the horizon, spiraling, building. Like puppets with their strings cut, the remaining Death Eaters fell as one. Cries of victory should have lifted into the air. Instead weary heads looked around in confusion. Surely if the Dark Lord were destroyed the air of malevolence would have lessened. Instead, it felt stronger. Shoulders hunched under the oppressive weight.

Centaurs broke free of the forest. Animals - magical and otherwise - fled the dark confines of their home. Remus tensed as his instincts screamed at him to run, to put as much distance between him and the forest as possible. His ears picked up a cry of anguish that had goosebumps rising along his arms.

"Run!" he screamed.
It was unnecessary. Everyone still standing bolted for the castle, knowing it was their only hope. Remus hesitated. His heart beat quickly. The werewolf in him resonated to the magic spiraling faster, tighter through the air. He suddenly understood. Shadow… Harry… his other cub. Growling, he beat back his wolf and walked toward the Dark source. His pup needed him.

xXx

The DA huddled within the mostly destroyed Room of Requirement. Huge stones lay crumbled across the room. Students lay here and there, bleeding, wounded. Others held defensive positions and attacked the oncoming enemies. When the Death Eaters fell, the vampires and werewolves didn't look like they cared, continuing to come at them, blood-crazed, but then they all paused. Each and every one turning to look in the same direction.

Draco stood up. His senses screaming as the wards practically shrieked in alarm. The Dark creatures turned tail and ran as fast as they could. They had to get out. They had to get away from the death ready to crash upon all their heads. The students cheered tiredly. Some breaking into tears of utter relief and joy.

"It's over! It's over!"

"Sirius!" Draco barked. He wavered as he took a step forward but then steadied. "Get them to the Chamber of Secrets. NOW!" He mentally tweaked a ward and said to the whole castle, "Everyone get to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom immediately. Sirius Black will direct you. This isn't a drill. Go there quickly. Your lives are in danger!"

Sirius, filthy and wounded, didn't even hesitate. He grabbed the nearest students and yelled into their dazed faces to move.

Draco couldn't spare them any more attention. He strode down the hallway toward the Headmaster's office. It was easier to work the wards from there because it was the nexus. His plan was simple. Divert all remaining power to the wards protecting the castle's integrity. Even then, he wasn't sure they were going to survive.

"Shadow…" Gritting his teeth, he pushed the thought of his lover away. He had to survive. Had to make sure as many as possible made it through this as he could. For Shadow.

xXx

Neville recoiled from the destructive magic. Earth was a balance of both death and creation, but he could not tolerate such pure destruction. Nothing living could. That was the point. There was no fighting it. This magic was Annihilation. Implacable. Unchangeable. There was nothing to do but retreat to where life could still exist.

But Neville was not only Earth. He was also human. He was also a brother. His human mind knew the source of this magic and could not accept the Truth of the Earth. He staggered as he transformed from tree back to boy. It was painful. He hated the limits of this body. Hated its vulnerability and singleness. He ignored everything else and walked forward into the destroyed clearing.

Shadow, looking like Harry Potter, knelt in the center of a blackened circle of earth. Neville winced and had to force his eyes away from the dead ground. Devastated bodies of Death Eaters lay scattered about his brother. Voldemort's body was nowhere to be seen, but Neville suspected the ravaged pile of meat and bone to the right had once been the Dark Lord in question.

The war was over.
He looked back at his brother. Green eyes stared blindly, tears of utter misery streaked Harry’s face. His hands clawed at his messy dark brown hair while his mouth hung open, face stretched with anguish.

Suddenly, Remus ran past a shocked Neville. "Harry! Harry, it's over. Stop. Harry, please, get a hold of yourself! You're going to kill us all!"

"Don't touch him!" Neville rasped.


Harry made no motion that he'd heard, but there was a change in the air. The teen shrieked, insanity resonating in the sound, and crumbled bonelessly. The freed Black magic snapped with a sound deeper than thunder. Neville felt Death bearing down on them and flung up a hand. A wave of earth washed over his mentor. They were pushed down, down deep.

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As soon as the Chamber stopped shaking, Sirius bounded for the stairs.

"What should we do?" Deputy Headmistress Vector called.

"Wait here. I'll be right back," Sirius answered over his shoulder. He ran as fast as his injured left leg allowed him. It took much too long to climb the stairs to the Headmaster's office. He burst through the door and gasped at what he found.

Draco lay pale and unconscious. Blood still splattered his hair, covered his skin, but he could still tell that fresh blood was coming from the blond's nose in a steady stream. His thin chest rose and fell weakly, his breathing was uneven. Sirius scooped him up and raced for the infirmary. It wasn't until he was laying Draco out on a bed that he realized Poppy was in the Chamber. He spun, a whine escaping his throat, knowing it would take half-an-hour to get down to the Chamber and get back with the nurse.

"Step aside, Sirius," Septima Vector said gently as Poppy hurried over to injured teen, wand already ready.

"But I told you…"

"I don't wait very well." The woman smiled at him. "I will fetch the older students and have them help me get the injured children up here. Why don't you start gathering those injured from outside. I'll send you help as soon as I can get organized."

Sirius stared dumbly for a moment, shocked by the competent and strong woman before him. He recovered quickly as a grin flashed across his face and he bowed low. "Of course, madam."

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It took days to recover from the aftermath. Hundreds had fought and most all those surviving needed healing of some kind.

Turns out the Ministry wasn't as ineffectual as the Order feared. Aurors had arrived at the start of the fight and protected Hogsmeade as much as possible. It was due to their efforts that not a single civilian had been killed. The dawn after Voldemort's demise, Minister Scrimgeour arrived at Hogwarts with his soldiers, dirty from battle and feeling triumphant.
He released Minerva with an apology and promised to recognize the valiant Order of the Phoenix who had taken on the brunt of the Dark Forces. Minerva was reinstated at the Headmistress of Hogwarts much to most everyone's relief.

Of the seventy-two Order members, twenty-six died that horrific night. Charlie Weasley, one of the Triad, died by a werewolf. Bill Weasley was half-turned by the one who killed his brother before he managed to kill the beast. Belfry McKinnon, the last of the McKinnons, died at the point of Rookwood's wand. Almost three dozen other Order members were hospitalized. Fred Weasley suffered severe head trauma and fell into a coma.

Twenty-two Aurors also died in the line of duty. Those Aurors who were injured were fortunately well enough to be patched up at the Ministry and forwent a trip to the hospital.

Unfortunately, seven students died during the attack on Hogwarts and thirty-seven more were severely injured and transferred to Saint Mungo's. Ron Weasley was on the list of the dead and was awarded an Order of Merlin, Second Class, for accurately casting the life switching spell, which can only be done if the caster truly wishes to die in the place of another.

Twenty-nine werewolves and thirty-six vampires perished at the hands of the Light. Fifty Death Eater bodies were found, including those of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Remus was found alive, half-buried under a pile of charred, dead earth in the clearing where the Dark Lord's remains were discovered. He was rushed to Hogwarts' infirmary and was released three days later.

Severus was found just barely breathing in the Shrieking Shack. He also was taken to the infirmary. He was released a week later.

Neville Longbottom was never found and is still missing.

Sirius Black was cleared of all charges and granted an Order of Merlin, Second Class, for bravery.

Draco Black was diagnosed as having contracted the vampirism, but he disappeared before Aurors could place him in confinement and order his execution. Sirius was forced to remove him as Black Heir and instead named Marissa Black, a Muggleborn girl he'd adopted, as his Heir instead. Draco was still part of the Black family, however, as Sirius refused to disinherit him completely despite his new status as a Dark creature.

Medals were also granted to every surviving member of the Order of the Phoenix, including Severus Snape, and Hogwarts' Defense Association, including Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom.

And then there was Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived… He was found in the same clearing as Remus Lupin. Minister Scrimgeour awarded the teen the Order of Merlin, First Class, and granted him the title of Savior of the Wizarding World, Hero and Champion of the Light. He was pronounced dead by Mediwitch Poppy Pomfrey on arrival at Hogwarts not an hour after he was found.

The whole of the Wizarding World felt humbled and grateful to the child who died for them. Candle vigils were held, and lightning bolts were drawn on foreheads with ashes to honor of the fallen hero.

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Severus very carefully made his way home, making certain that he was not being followed by either Aurors, the press, or those who wanted to thank him for his heroic deeds during the Final Battle. It had been a month since the battle. He’d thought they'd leave him alone by now, but they persisted in
their idiocy. Every 'thank you' made him cringe. He'd done nothing to aid the Light. All he managed to do was almost die, but he said nothing, afraid that any disparagement he cast on his own name would tarnish his son's as well.

The house sat quietly on the hill, the outside as ramshackle as ever, but as he turned the doorknob he was embraced by light and simple elegance. Soft music was playing from the sitting room. He peered around the door to find Nymphadora Tonks sitting on the couch near the radio. Her hair was long and yellow today, meaning she was happy. Her hand rested on the swell of her stomach. The baby had been restless lately, but the music helped.

"I was not aware you'd be visiting today. I would have come home sooner," Severus drawled as he stepped fully into the room.

Tonks smiled winsomely. "Remus had a bad dream last night. He wanted to see Shadow."

Severus nodded. The werewolf often had dreams consisting of Black magic and Shadow's anguished cries. It didn't help that they had convinced Poppy to put a golem in for Harry Potter and kill the boy off. Seeing Harry Potter's dead body in a casket as they buried him had been very difficult despite knowing Shadow Snape was alive at home. The image had lingered for all of them.

"You look like hell, Severus. I wish you'd let us help you," Tonks murmured. Her smile had gone and her eyes had turned dark and calculating.

"We manage," Severus answered. "Excuse me."

Without another word, he turned and headed for the stairs. Remus was in Shadow's bedroom as Severus knew he would be. The werewolf sat beside the bed, his head hanging and his hand tightly wrapped around Shadow's.

The teen lay as if sleeping, face slack and peaceful, but he was not merely sleeping. Shadow was in a deep coma, completely unresponsive to outside stimuli. His dreams were his sole reality now.

"Any progress?" Remus asked softly.

He hated talking loudly and getting no reaction from Shadow. It reinforced the grim reality that nothing would wake Shadow now. He'd run every medical test available, both Muggle and magical, but there was nothing he could do. Not even Mind magic reached Shadow. His mind was too shut off for anyone, even Severus, to contact.

"Not yet."

Severus still had hope that he'd be able to create a potion to help his son. He spent his days on experimental potions and brewing for a discreet apothecary in London. It paid him but not as well as he would have liked. His experiments were costly in both time and money, which limited how many he could make in a month.

While they'd been talking, the sun had set and Draco stepped silently into the room. Neither man noticed until he chose to speak. "I think his eyes flickered once. That's a good sign."

Remus studied the young man. Draco had been naturally pale before, but now he reminded Remus of the color of the full moon. The light blond locks also possessed an unnatural sheen. The grey eyes were hooded. Had Draco met his stare too directly, Remus and every other human was in danger of being mesmerized. Fortunately, the hunting instincts Draco now lived with had been dulled by a potion Severus had created. Apparently, it had similar effects on vampires as the Wolvesbane had on werewolves.
"You are looking better," he remarked with a smile. The Slytherin had been looking fairly gaunt lately.

Draco inclined his head, but he did not inform him as to the reason of his weight gain and more healthy appearance.

Remus didn't press. "Anymore Neville sightings?" he asked instead.

"I saw him while walking through the woods last week. He asked how Shadow was doing. He looked well," Draco answered with a smile.

Remus sighed, deeply relieved that the Gryffindor was still alive. Neville had gone back to being a tree and had yet to stay human for more than a few hours time. "I wish he'd approach me."

"These thing take time." The blond gazed down at his love. "It's only been a month."

"I know." Remus stood. "I should go. The Tonkses are coming over to Grimmauld Place for dinner. Marissa is helping cook, I believe."

Severus's lips quirked. "I think I will be extra glad of Omi tonight."

Remus laughed. "Sirius hoped getting her interested in cooking would introduce her to a wider variety of food. We've had four days of green eggs and ham and are quite desperate for a change of pace."

Draco snorted. "Sirius spoils her."

Severus silently agreed.

"Well, so do you when she visits," Remus retorted wryly. "Speaking of, they want to come this weekend, if that's okay?"

"Marissa is always welcome," Severus allowed.

"Good. Well... goodnight."

Draco waited until he heard the front door close softly, signaling that Remus and Tonks had left, before reaching forward and caressing a black curl. "Hello, love. What do you want me to read to you tonight?"

Severus watched his godson interact with Shadow for several minutes before stepping outside. His mind had been calmed and revitalized by the tender scene. He was ready to get back to work. Shadow would wake again. He'd make sure of it.

~ The End ~

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A/N: This is it, guys! This is the last chapter of this installment. There will be a third installment. A kind of long epilogue that follows titled FLYING WITH TATTERED WINGS. I hope you read on and enjoy it. I really, really appreciate all the support and feedback and comments. It keeps my story alive. THANK YOU!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!